

MONSTER ON THE MARGIN: THE SEA SERPENT PHENOMENON

IN NEW ENGLAND, 1817-1849

by

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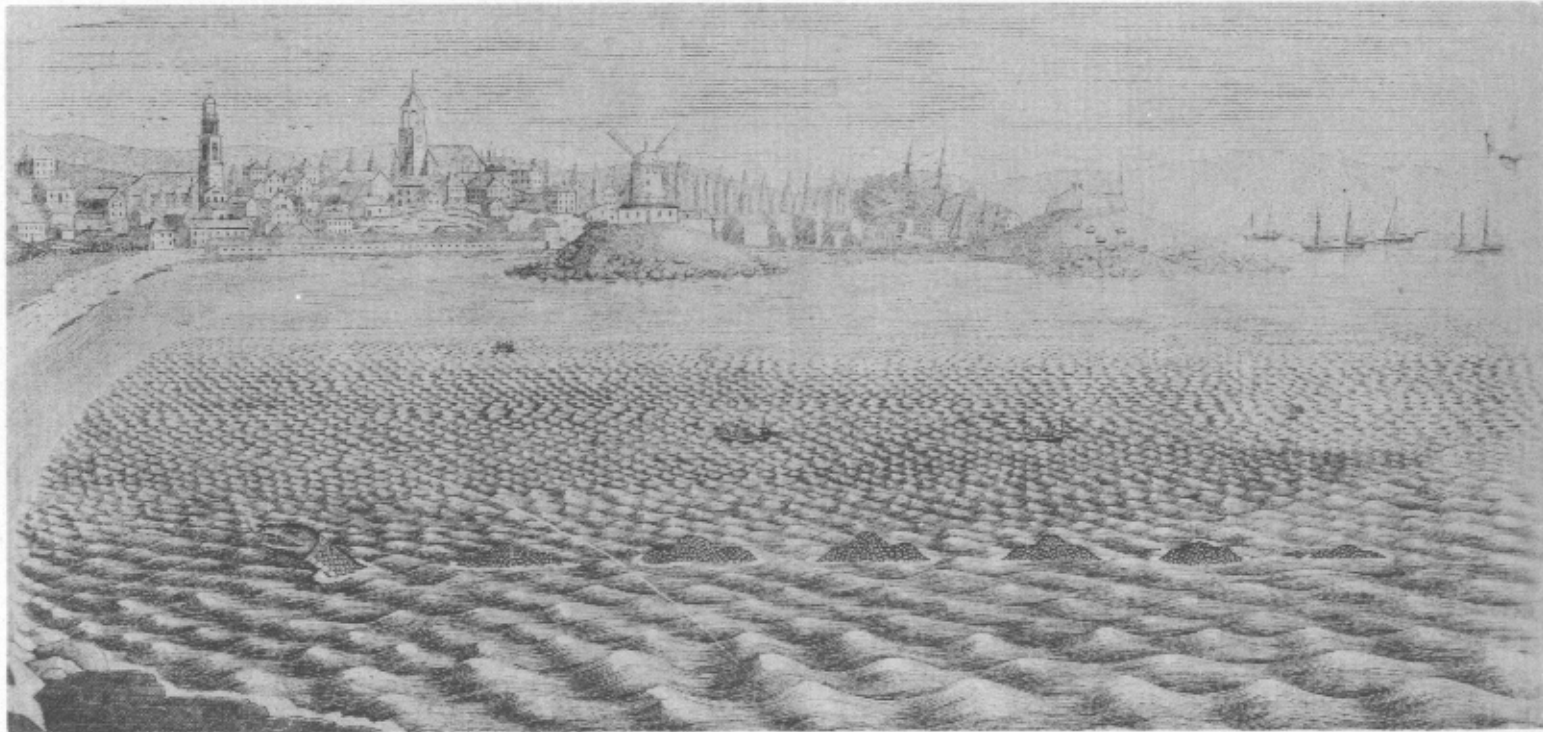
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Gloucester Harbor in 1817. Engraving from a sketch by Captain John Beach, Jr., reproduced through the courtesy of Charles D. Childs.

From Henry Napier, *New England Blockaded, 1814: The Journal of Lt. Henry Napier, H.M.S. Nympe*, Walter Muir, Ed. The panorama of the Sea Serpent painted by John Ritto Penniman and exhibited in Boston, Salem and New York City, Oct. 1817-Jan. 1818. In February, 1818 the painting was sold to Charles Willson Peale, who exhibited it in Philadelphia.

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ABSTRACT

Monster on the Margin: The Sea Serpent Phenomenon in New England, 1817-1849, by Elizabeth Iris Burns, is a cultural history of the Sea Serpent seen by thousands of people on the New England coast, treating first, the creature's impact in the writing of New England regional identity, a process evident in reportage, science, essays, poetry and fiction; second, scientific inquiry in relation to a two-sided nationalistic discourse of natural history; and third, the New England project of historicizing the Sea Serpent, when newspaper editors and writers characterized the creature in the context of their troubled recent past and ambivalent place in presidents Jefferson and Madison's expanding union. It argues that the Sea Serpent contained anxieties and aspirations of New England in these years, and so was both a hot and cold medium according to the definitions of Marshall McLuhan. Finally, the work explores the popular cultural dimensions of the Sea Serpent, relating it to a change in attitude toward the seashore from repulsion to fascination and discusses how the Sea Serpent anticipated the showmanship of P.T. Barnum. The hot media of Sea Serpent reports, written to list facts, cooled down over several decades to admit increasing elaboration, such that the phenomenon in the antebellum allowed the folkloric and psychological refraction seen in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent," 1841, and the fantastic mixed-form novel, Eugene Batchelder's *Romance of the Sea Serpent, or, The Ichthyosaurus*, 1849. In the Early Republic, the Sea Serpent, by his cultural work and in spite of his mythic associations, became real.

INTRODUCTION

On October 15, 1815, the crew of the brig *Trim*, bound from Gibraltar to Alexandria, Virginia, encountered a strange marine “substance” about 160 miles west of the Canary Islands. Captain Cleveland, the ship’s commander, sent the mate and two crew members in a boat to investigate. The mate observed that the “substance” was thirty to forty feet in length, three to three-and-a-half feet in circumference, and was “the deepest crimson” in color that “reflected in the water some yards around.” He concluded that he had seen a sea serpent because, even though they were looking at it through four feet of water, it was “lying quailed up with his head on top of the quail.” As the vessel approached, the creature sprang up toward it in “an attitude of attack.” Constantine S. Rafinesque, an eminent naturalist of the period, called the creature a *Scarlet Sea Serpent*, and with the information in the articles alone, wrote that it was very likely to be “a fish,” and with some doubt, gave it the name, *Octipos? Coccineus*—Entirely of a bright crimson, head acute. Nothing further in the Gazettes . . .” Rafinesque’s reliance on newspaper information as classificatory evidence was often viewed contemptuously by other naturalists, but in his use of these sources, he was also trying to supplant the visible authority of a crowd of “superficial writers” who “hasten to offer us, instead of facts, their own ideas and conjectures on the subject [natural history] which prove [to be] . . . often wild, incorrect, or ridiculous.”¹

¹ *Alexandria Gazette*, 9 Dec. 1815;
“Alexandria, December 9,” *Rhode-Island American*, 15 Dec. 1815;

The preceding story is significant in the study of the New England Sea Serpent because it contains congruous and incongruous elements with that experience of just two years later. Between 1817 and 1850, the Sea Serpent was a part of coastal New England life, and its presence, along with the perception and memory of it, inspired much cultural production, scientific inquiry and literary development, both in and beyond New England. While the creature the mate of the *Trim* found was accounted “in form and appearance” to be like a sea serpent, sea serpents were not unknown to people of coastal New England. Newspapers there carried and circulated sighting reports of sea serpents in 1793 in Penobscot Bay and one off Portsmouth, New Hampshire in 1796.

The captain and crew of the *Trim* experienced their sea serpent out in the remote eastern Atlantic, and could have chosen not to report their experience to anyone. On the coasts of New England, in Penobscot Bay, or on Long Island Sound almost two years later, hundreds of people saw the Sea Serpent, and to keep the experience as some kind of silent understanding was impossible for complex cultural reasons, even though at the same time, there were other sighting and expedition reports that have the same quality of insular restraint among a few men found in that of the *Trim*. One of the first reports in the Essex Register, August 16,

“Domestic Intelligence,” *The Repertory* [Boston, MA], 16 Dec. 1815;
 “Alexandria, (Vir.) Dec. 9. Sea Serpent,” *Connecticut Mirror* [Hartford, CT], 18 Dec. 1815;
 “Alexandria, (Vir.) December 9. Sea Serpent,” *National Aegis* [Worcester, MA], 20 Dec. 1815;
 “By the Mails. Alexandria, (Vir.) Dec 9. Sea Serpent,” *Providence Gazette*, 23 Dec. 1815;
 Constantine S. Rafinesque, “Art. 5, Museum of Natural Sciences . . . , Dissertation on Water Snakes, Sea Snakes, and Sea Serpents,” *The American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review*, Volume 1, 1817, (New York: Kirk, Mercein, 1817), 431, 434,
<http://books.google.com/books?id=8VpFAAAAYAAJ&dq=dissertation%20on%20water%20snakes&pg=PA1#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, 4-2014

1817, tells us that the New England Sea Serpent was between fifty and one-hundred feet long, in a few other reports, he is longer. Most of the accounts tell us that he had a black or brown back, with his underside a bright brownish yellow or white. But the most significant of these differences from the “substance,” is that whereas the vessel and crew of the *Trim*’s boat were menaced by their sea serpent, the New England observers, despite their mixed wonder and terror at the creature’s appearance, found that he was more evasive than aggressive in nature.

Both experiences produced scientific interest leading to a classification for each creature, but in the case of New England’s Sea Serpent, the scientific inquiry was inconclusive, carried on in print, over several years, and involved several scientists in the U.S., France and the British Empire. This work is the story of the New England Sea Serpent, as a curiosity and cultural phenomenon in the history of New England and New York City from 1817 to 1833. Its approach segments the phenomenon into four experiences, the first two show what human beings did with the Sea Serpent, and the second two show what the phenomenon itself did, what kinds of imaginative, cultural and commercial activity it generated first in terms of its historical dimensions, and then in terms of fiction, art and drama. While some historical observers of the Sea Serpent phenomenon of 1817 have suggested, and dismissed, that the creature was the product of mass hallucination or hysteria, one other, Sherrie Lyons, has indicated a correlation between the New England Sea Serpent and scientific developments of the time, in which “paleontologists began dredging up plesiosaurs and other relics from the past . . .” This work, like that of

Lyons, does not attribute the Sea Serpent appearances to any cause, its case is correlative, and shows some of the corresponding history and some regionally-specific cultural historical interpretation, and how these encouraged the elaboration in expression, of the phenomenon. The sight of the Sea Serpent activated the nationalistic, non-scientific discourse of natural history in New England, prompted the collection of accounts in print and the collation of details such that there was made, a type of synthetic or composite picture of the Sea Serpent, one that informed several discourses well beyond science.

Despite the rational process the New Englanders put their Sea Serpent experience through; the creature was marginalized in science, not just because of the continuing failure of would-be Sea Serpent expeditions to fulfill evidentiary requirements for a taxonomic classification. The inquiry was marginalized also for historical reasons, the most important of which was the increasing gulf between the scientific and non-scientific discourses of natural history in the United States over the first half of the nineteenth-century, a process Andrew J. Lewis interpreted as the building of the “empire of reason,” in which “an educated elite” determined “the boundaries of nature and the natural world for their countrymen.” The American public, however, was not interested in silent deference even where it seemed to be due, and so there was a tendency among the scientifically learned to wall off their studies from the cacophonous discourse of fact carried on in newspapers and lay correspondence. Because of this process, in the 1830s, as the elite discourse of natural history was starting to professionalize and segment into

discrete disciplines, scientific inquiry was increasingly reserved to more answerable questions, and the Sea Serpent was what Sherrie Lyons called a “fringe” subject area. A paleontologist in the mid-nineteenth-century, if he was trying to build both his career and the credibility of the discipline, would favor the work of “constructing stratigraphical maps” over that of “seeking out these illusive creatures.” Finally, there was the creature’s imagined existence as expressed in several types of media, a development simultaneous with the local inquiries of September, 1817. Because of the vicissitudes of the phenomenon in the years afterward, imagination soon overtook inquiry, and creative reflection proved deeper than theoretical possibilities, hence the phenomenon generated more literary than scientific sources.²

The Sea Serpent, as the object seen in the ocean, is a medium as defined by Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media, The Extensions of Man*, 1965, 1994, first as “any extension of ourselves,” and on its face, the Sea Serpent, particularly in the sources for third chapter of this work, was an extension of the concerns of New Englanders writing about him. But a medium also has the characteristic of

² R.T. Gould, *The Case for the Sea Serpent*, (London: Allan, 1930), 70;
 J.P. O’Neill, *The Great New England Sea Serpent: An Account of Unknown Creatures . . .*, (Camden, ME: Down East Books, 1999), 170;
 Sherrie Lyons, *Species, Serpents, Spirits, and Skulls: Science at the Margins in the Victorian Age*, (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 19;
 Andrew J. Lewis, “A Democracy of Facts, An Empire of Reason: Swallow Submersion and Natural History in the Early American Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 62 4, (Oct. 2005), 670-671
 Sherrie Lyons, “Sea Monsters, Myth or Genuine Relic of the Past?,” *Oceanographic History: The Pacific and Beyond*, Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress on the History of Oceanography, Keith R. Benson, Philip F. Rehbock, eds., (Seattle, London: Univ. of Washington Press, 1993), 66-67
<http://books.google.com/books?id=kfv059OL6kQC&lpg=PR5&dq=scherrie%20lyons%20oceanographi c&pg=PA60#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, accessed 4-2014

conveying no information in itself, and yet containing other media. For instance, much fictional writing about the Sea Serpent takes the form of Sea Serpent reports, and these in turn are drawn from the Sea Serpent sighting, an event conveying no information in itself at all, nevertheless, a prompt for the subsequent report and finally developed as a character in a poem or story. And so in the Sea Serpent phenomenon, we see two aspects of mediumship as understood by McLuhan.³

Furthermore, as a medium, not only is the Sea Serpent an extension of his inquirers and authors, and not only does he contain other media, the Sea Serpent is, as seen, is a hot medium, and yet the Sea Serpent as reported and elaborated, is a cold medium. The hot medium, McLuhan explains, is one apprehended by only one sense, in high definition, and, most important, the hot medium is closed to elaboration and audience participation. Even participants in the expeditions fitted out to catch the Sea Serpent did not change what they pursued, even though one, Captain Richard Rich, in 1818, by way of his own reflections, made the Sea Serpent into a cold medium and then defined it on his own terms. Similarly, when news editors, correspondents and other observers began to write and publish their experiences, they immediately cooled the Sea Serpent down, because once rendered into language, the creature and experience could appeal to several

³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, First MIT Edition, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 7-8

senses, and as a result, the Sea Serpent became open to elaboration, historicizing, depiction and characterization.⁴

In this work, the people of coastal New England, familiar with the use of imagination in the creation and re-creation of their own regional identity encounter the Sea Serpent. They create two levels of interaction with the creature, or object, in this phenomenon. The first is the perceptual work of the observer, and second is the intellectual work of the reporter, editor, scientist and cultural producer, whether he is an artist, writer, actor or other type of showman. In the nationalistic practice of natural history unique to the Early Republic, interaction with the Sea Serpent was important because Americans privileged inductive reasoning through the accumulation of facts over the use of deductive reasoning by system or theory, which was thought to represent a sophisticated but nonetheless corrupt European culture. To generalize about nature was to diminish it. So, in the United States, with its new democratic culture, the observer and his experience possessed an authority and importance they did not have elsewhere.⁵

But, the category of “fact” remained “elastic” in American natural history, and the reliance on facts at the time “fostered an intellectual openness and permissiveness that allowed possibility to become the dominant scientific metaphor and outlook on American nature . . .” The idea of majority rule in the pursuit of scientific truth created a situation analogous to demagogic political

⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 29-31

⁵ Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 40

maneuvering that elite American scientists eyed with unease, in which, and particularly in the case of the Sea Serpent, “a vocal majority” overwhelmed “an enlightened but less powerful minority.” The Sea Serpent inquiry, in practice, was two inquiries set side by side, like two people, looking in the same direction, yet not interacting—the one inquiry carried on in the newspapers, on the beaches and streets by the public, and the other carried on in the correspondence of men who knew Latin, and therefore, could converse with the only others that counted. In his overview of the Sea Serpent phenomenon and the public in 1817, Constantine S. Rafinesque wrote of the implications of the discourse of fact as “superficial writers” contributed to it, that they rendered the “contemptible the subject of their inquiries . . .” that is, the Sea Serpent, and that if “their crude speculations ever reach Europe, they will certainly afford very unfavourable specimens of our knowledge and attainments in science.”⁶

So, from a natural history perspective, New England’s approach to the Sea Serpent brought to the inquiry the best of both worlds in terms of science at the time. The non-scientific natural historical inquiry into the Sea Serpent was the sighting experience, written as sighting reports in newspapers, and eventually, commercialized for the public in fiction, poetry, panoramas and pantomime. The scientific inquiry was made by men like David Humphreys of Connecticut, a Friend of the Royal Society who would send his correspondence to London in November,

⁶ Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 40
Constantine S. Rafinesque, “Dissertation on Water Snakes, Sea Snakes, and Sea Serpents,” 431

1817, William Dandridge Peck, a professor of entomology at Harvard who published a brief article on the Sea Serpent in 1818, and John Davis, Jacob Bigelow, and Francis C. Gray, who wrote the *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England, Relative to a Large Marine Animal . . .*, 1817. Of course, none of these men wished to imagine or create the Sea Serpent as part of a distinctive experience of coastal New England. Their only objective in studying the Sea Serpent was to determine the creature's taxonomic relationship to other animals, an impossible task without concrete or physical evidence. Scientific writers in New England also had to contend with a public that was mostly indifferent to their authority concerning animal classification because, like Victorian England, the Early Republic had different "interest groups" that employed varying "systems of classification that reflected their particular needs and experience . . . butchers and artists, farmers and showmen, all employed distinctive taxonomies in their work . . ." even though these alternate systems were unarticulated and unsystematic.⁷

An example of an American classification controversy that pitted vernacular and traditional ideas about animals against new scientific thinking was the New York City case of *James Maurice V. Samuel Judd*, heard in December 1818, in which Judd, a candle-maker and oil merchant refused to pay a fee to James Maurice, a fish oil inspector, for casks of spermaceti oil, arguing that the oil was not fish oil, but whale oil, and that whales were not fish. An eminent scientist of the era, Samuel L.

⁷ Harriet Ritvo, Introduction to *The Platypus, the Mermaid, and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination*, (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard U P, 1997), XII

Mitchill, who with Constantine Rafinesque, had helped to found the New York Lyceum of Natural History in the year before, testified that the whale was not a fish, but a mammal. Where scientific natural history favored Judd's conclusion, the court's ruling did not. In the course of the trial, the court sought out fishermen, thinking that their experience might help settle the question, but even among them, there was no conclusive and formal classification between whales and fish. Biblical tradition, thought by most Americans to be inerrant, was clear, the "great fish" that swallowed Jonah was a whale, and who was going to call the author of scripture a "superficial writer"? In the first half of the nineteenth-century, then, there were, in the practice of natural history several strands of incessantly vibrating and cacophonous authority. In her own study of Victorian natural history and classification, Harriet Ritvo noted that in the midst of this confusion of taxonomies, even scientific classification was "similarly polymorphic."⁸

Where there prevailed so much confusion of authority, the division between descriptive evidence and concrete evidence in the Sea Serpent inquiry became all the more important in the writing of the *Report* that the Linnaean Society of New England published in November, 1817. A closer look at the *Report* shows that the desire for concrete evidence was forcefully present before such material was acquired; this desire affected the committee members' scientific judgment negatively, and ultimately led to the report's flawed conclusion, the classification of

⁸ D. Graham Burnett, *Trying Leviathan: The Nineteenth-Century New York Court Case that Put the Whale on Trial and Challenged the Order of Nature*, (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton U P, 2007), 4; Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus, the Mermaid, and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination*, xii

a deformed black snake, *Coluber Constrictor*, as a *Scoliophis Atlanticus*. The history of the *Report*, as written by lawyer and local historian Wayne Soini of Brookline, is the narrative of “a puzzle, a project, and a flop.” It flopped when John Davis, the committee chair, acquired the black snake, and, “convinced that it was no coincidence but kindred of the sea serpent,” had a precise engraving of the “dissected snake” made to illustrate the *Report*. What is clear is that the descriptive evidence, the eleven reports the committee had collected along with the newspaper reports they had ignored, was generous, and the concrete evidence, which had to form the basis of any scientifically-credible taxonomic classification, was scant. The committee had originally planned to “damn the specimen requirement and . . . go full speed with sequestered witnesses,” and so they would leave to other organizations and members of the “scientific world” the task of classifying the Sea Serpent from concrete evidence. When Gloucester’s Justice of the Peace, Lonson Nash, reported the capture of a specimen at Loblolly Cove, the committee became “enchanted,” and in their eyes, “the Loblolly Cove baby resembled its Gloucester parent and that was that.”⁹

Some of the learned Sea Serpent inquirers, David Humphreys and Samuel L. Mitchill, when they shifted the inquiry from the object to the observer, that is, from the Sea Serpent’s existence to the context of seeing the Serpent, their study and reflection began to yield some interesting results. When they put the Sea Serpent

⁹ Wayne Soini, *Gloucester’s Sea Serpent*, (Charleston, SC and London: History Press, 2011), 13, 17, 113-114

into the eye of the beholder and his culture, the lines of inquiry negotiated new areas of science, psychology and ethnography. These fields of study started to be developed in the Enlightenment, and would be refined in the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries. Without the confirmation of concrete evidence, the plausible but unconfirmed and unclassified Sea Serpent becomes amorphous, and functioned as a medium of historical trauma, the subject of history as sighting reports, and the subject of literature and performance as fiction, futurism, art and drama.

New Englanders saw, wrote and read reports about the Sea Serpent, they studied the Sea Serpent, and in the process of further cultural interaction with the Sea Serpent over the first half of the nineteenth-century, they gave the creature an imaginative existence and made him a medium of their recent history, of their distinctiveness, and aspirations. Why was it impossible for New Englanders to remain reticent about the Sea Serpent between 1817 and 1825? As a phenomenon of sighting, writing, inquiry and imagination, the Sea Serpent was a feature of the regional culture of New England; in no other part of North America was the Sea Serpent seen by beachgoers and mariners together. Though the writing about the creature became slightly more nationalized post 1830, even expressions from beyond New England often acknowledged the creature as peculiar to that region's culture. In a literary context, regionalism is defined as a "fidelity to a particular geographical area" and the "representation of its habits, speech, manners, history, folklore, or beliefs." To confirm the presence of regionalism in a literary work, one must perceive that "the actions and personages of such a work may not be moved,

without major loss or distortion, to any other geographical setting.” One may argue, based on this definition, as applied to the sheer volume of sighting reports between 1817 and 1825, and as applied to the content of most of the writing about the Sea Serpent in the U.S. as a whole, that the Sea Serpent was a regional creation and representative of New England. It is not possible, based on history and content, to move the written sources on which this work draws to another place. While the crew of the *Trim* saw a creature resembling a sea serpent more than a hundred miles from the Canary Islands, there is no regionalism in the reports about it, neither the commander, nor anyone in the crew was depicted as representing a specific place. As such, the *Trim* sighting represents the mariners’ experience as it is unattached in the ocean.¹⁰

But reports of the New England Sea Serpent bring in specific things that are part of New England life and the region’s experience with the creature and its recent past. For example, in a report dated January, 1818, the crew of an unnamed ship, on August 15, 1817, negotiated Cape Ann, and “bearing N.E. . . . saw something floating on the water that appeared like a number of casks of *West India Rum, adrift.*” The crew found it to be the Sloop *Sea-Serpent*, fishing for herring. “We immediately armed a part of the crew with harpoons, spears, nets, &c. with the intention of taking her, but found all our exertions fruitless.” In July, 1818, the writer “Leviathan” quotes the boastful Sea Serpent menacing the local whales with

¹⁰ “Regionalism,” *A Handbook to Literature, Eighth Edition*, William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, eds., (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999), 435-436

the statement: “I’ll crush their pride, if for my ends, I hire my good *Nantucket* friends to fight upon my side.” The first story tells us about the desire of people living on Cape Ann and coastal Massachusetts to catch the Sea Serpent, that is, to find and produce concrete evidence of his existence, months after the “Sea Serpent” season ended in 1817, and months before it began again in May, 1818. The second refers to the whale fishery of Nantucket and was, perhaps, prompted by a June 27th report from Hallowell, in the district of Maine that told of a combative episode between the Sea Serpent and a whale. The fact that these two literary pieces are regional can be argued from their content alone; they are firmly rooted in the elements of New England experience, culture, work and aspirations.¹¹

In its culture New England stands apart from the rest of the nation first because of its size, which “tends to bestow on . . . [the region] a natural coherence and wholeness that eludes other, more geographically and imaginatively unwieldy regions” Hence, it is a “place where life is lived on a human scale” where towns are “hived off” from one another, and whose “boundary signs announce the date of their birth,” and by these, New Englanders created over the centuries a “sense of history” and “a terrain dense with border crossings.” The “scale of life” in New England also “suggests that it is a cultural region—a place where people have etched distinctive patterns into the landscape.” Culture is defined by Joseph A. Conforti, whose works seek to explain New England’s distinctiveness, in a New

¹¹“Extracts,” *Connecticut Journal* [New Haven, CT], 27 Jan. 1818; Leviathan, “The Sea Serpent,” *The Idiot, or, Invisible Rambler*, 11 Jul. 1818

England context as unfixed, “dynamic, continually changing, and historically contingent . . .” In the nineteenth-century specifically, New Englanders responded to increasing ethnic diversity, and advancing industrialization and urbanization by “revising explanations of regional distinctiveness.”¹²

Furthermore, Conforti tells us that in the early nineteenth-century, New England “political and cultural leaders expressed a ‘national regionalism,’” in which they did share with other Americans a sense of the nation’s “nascent identity,” however, they also believed that New England’s “superior ways and institutions offered a republican recipe for the New Englandization of the nation.” These high ambitions were thwarted between 1800 and 1815, first, by the Louisiana Purchase, which occasioned in the region’s leadership “concerns about a burgeoning federal union that was politically, ethnically, and physically the antithesis of a compact, homogenous land of steady republican habits.” In 1807, the Embargo and then the War of 1812 “disrupted regional trade,” and underscored the differences between the interests of a “commercial maritime” New England and the “agrarian South.” The coastal areas of New England were, in these years, “always a wellspring of Federalist support,” and so there grew in the period, “a renewed sense of political and economic grievance fortified regional identity and inflamed secessionist sentiment.” Sentiment turned to symbolism when some Federalists started waving flags with five stars, “the banner of a New England confederacy” and then into

¹² Joseph Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity From the Pilgrims to the Twentieth-Century*, (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001), 2

action when the Hartford Convention met in December, 1814. The Sea Serpent met the New Englanders on their shores three years after the tension of the British Blockade, the British occupation of eastern Maine, and the Hartford Convention, and, like the five-star banner, he served to represent and delineate the region's distinctiveness without implying or asserting any precise regional-ideological statement.¹³

Central to the creation and imagining of New England as a region was the formation of the town, and whether that town was on the coast, or on the very edge of the frontier, it served as New England's most basic territorial, cultural, political, commercial and historical unit. The pattern of New England settlement in the seventeenth to the nineteenth-century has been called "serial town settlement . . . the continual creation and replication of towns across the landscape . . ." by David Jaffee. The process, as it progressed, and in its consistency over the centuries, represented a widespread regional consensus. Even when the settlement process became more commercialized in the eighteenth-century, serial town settlement continued through kin-related groups, and was, like a tradition or institution, "understood by New England's settlers and supervised by colonial authorities." The process included a literary component that generated highly specific "explanations of distinctiveness" through the writing of local histories, the "crafting of narratives" centered upon the events of town founding. As

¹³ Joseph Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity From the Pilgrims to the Twentieth-Century*, (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001), 82, 119,

colonization was a means of transmitting New England culture, “stories about colonization gave shape and meaning to New England life.” The historicizing tendency in New England settlement, progress and literature is evident in the seventeenth-century works of William Bradford, Anne Bradstreet, John Winthrop, Edward Johnson, Mary Rowlandson, William Hubbard, and Cotton Mather. After 1713, the region pulled itself together from the west to the east because “new bureaucratic structures were established and innovations were developed to meet the increased numbers of people and places involved in colonization.” The early practice that reflected a simple consensus had turned into a sort of machine. In the nineteenth-century, a new group of historians, among them Charles Hudson, Alonzo Lewis, and John J. Babson, would write local history that would again tell the settlement story, extend the narrative, and explain the region’s distinctiveness to its far-flung descendants in the nation.¹⁴

The Sea Serpent was incongruous with human expectations in its shape, size and speed, and a rare sight in the history before 1817, but, nonetheless, after August 6, 1817, seeing him had become part of being at the Massachusetts coast, whether at work or at play. Within two years, the Nahant Hotel would be built, there would be Sea Serpent cruises, a zoological treatise by the Linnaean Society of New England, facetiae, satire, science fiction and futuristic narratives would have been written of him, and these would be run along with announcements for

¹⁴ David Jaffee, *People of the Wachusett: Greater New England in History and Memory, 1630-1860*, (Ithaca, London: Cornell U P, 1999), 1-2, 156-157

exhibits of panoramas. New Englanders, in their historicizing tendency and in their desire to explain the Sea Serpent's distinctiveness in relation to their own, made the phenomenon part of their early nineteenth-century culture.

The Sea Serpent phenomenon shows the dynamic New England identity because he appeared at a time when the re-thinking of New England distinctiveness was necessary, in other words, his imagined existence was historically contingent. He appeared two years after the Peace of Ghent in 1815, at a time in which New Englanders would have found it necessary to rewrite their distinctiveness after the Federalist-dominated identity was played out. Between 1800 and 1815, in spite of much Republican influence, the region came to be defined as the last Federalist stronghold in the United States. Federalists in those years, with the collaboration of many ministers, often wrote their rhetoric, anti-Republican and anti-war, in regional-historical terms. Their imagined and written out sense of New England distinctiveness, fused with their own conservatism, was significant enough first, to give rise to and support secessionist sentiments that would culminate in the Hartford Convention and second, to provoke among people representing national authority the deep suspicion expressed by Stephen Decatur in the Blue Light Affair. In 1817, the Sea Serpent was an inversion of Jefferson's Embargo of 1807, in 1818, he was a bringer of battle to whales; he was often called a leviathan of the deep, a phrase charged with historical, regional and political meaning. Writers used the political rhetoric of the Jefferson Administration and the language of war often in their essays and fiction about the Sea Serpent. The creature was a medium in that

he contained the anxieties of New England's recent past, along with their aspirations for the future, the most powerful of which was to capture, kill, or even tame him, and to acquire greater knowledge of him and his world.

As he existed in the eye of the beholder, the Sea Serpent gained something scientific inquiries could not give him, an imaginative existence that was expressed in historical, poetic, dramatic, artistic and fictional dimensions. The Sea Serpent's career as an exhibit, and particularly the creature's amorphousness as a medium, anticipates the showmanship of P.T. Barnum, beginning with his exhibit of Joice Heth in 1835, and his exhibit of the Feejee Mermaid in 1842. Barnum found, in the course of Heth's career specifically, that the public enjoyed having several possible back stories, or narrative tracks to consider in viewing curiosities because they seemed to want to consider and conclude for themselves the nature and provenance of the object exhibited. In essence, the public, in viewing the exhibits and hearing several stories over a period of weeks or months, some that contradicted each other, was "amused even when it was conscious of being deceived." The dynamic of fascination, return, and additional observation, as it was played out wherever he exhibited Heth, made him a very rich man. In the case of the Sea Serpent, 1817-1833, there was no P.T. Barnum, no carefully-crafted script, nor were there any controversial dialogues among men of science or pretenders to the professions. Instead, there was the unclear anticipation of the sophisticated showmanship that would characterize American popular culture in the century after 1817. Observers of the Sea Serpent and the phenomenon itself were given the

“mass of evidence,” the reports, comments, poetry, and other cultural products that formed diverse stories of the creature, his travels, behavior, and his imagined relationship to humans. Like the viewers of Joice Heth, they chose to keep their minds in a gray zone, accommodating belief and unbelief together, and thus they could, in a modernizing world, wonder.¹⁵

The first chapter, “Seeing the Sea Serpent” discusses the sighting experience between 1817 and 1825, how it happened, how Sea Serpent reports were written, and the creation by New Englanders and their news editors of a composite type for the Sea Serpent. The Sea Serpent report was a story, newsworthy in itself, that carried no political meaning, and so Sea Serpent coverage enhanced the increasingly important news function of journalism at the time. It will also discuss the discourse of fact, the non-scientific practice of natural history in the Early Republic, as described by Andrew J. Lewis and why Sea Serpent reports were, in a nationalistic natural history discourse, important documents, and the historically and nationalistically-contingent nature of their importance at the time.

The second, “Anatomizing the Sea Serpent” unfolds the scientific inquiry into the Sea Serpent’s existence in the context of the creature’s place in the taxonomic tree and in the models of the development of life on earth that were being developed in the first half of the nineteenth-century by Charles Lyell, Richard Owen, and Charles Darwin. The eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries compose a

¹⁵ James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard U P, 2001), 19

period in which British travelers in particular collected flora and fauna from all over the world. By the early nineteenth-century, naturalists and collectors on both sides of the Atlantic were exhibiting and cataloguing the new objects and large groups of taxonomic relationships among forms were coming into focus. Such classification was directly dependent on the production of concrete evidence of a creature's form, its body, either in whole or in part. Because every classification of the Sea Serpent had been drawn from descriptive evidence, the creature would, in spite of his names, remain nondescript in science and in vernacular taxonomic schemes. As such, the creature was a cipher, a blank text, as Harriet Ritvo called him, on which many things were written in the early nineteenth-century.

The third, "Historicizing the Sea Serpent" tells us about the historical dimensions of the Sea Serpent as an imagined creature in relation to New England as its writers remembered the period between 1800 and 1815. In those years, New Englanders found themselves looking over the edge of the world the Revolution had made. They confronted an administration that had exacerbated political tensions soon after it began in 1801, exceeded its written powers in adding territory to the union in 1803, subjected New England to a damaging embargo, eviscerated the navy by 1809, and brought the nation into a war a majority of New Englanders would not support. In 1814, New Englanders collaborated openly with the inimical British, and considered secession. They had looked over the edge of the revolution and pulled back. But one cannot look over the edge of anything so profound as the creation of a nation and not be profoundly affected by it. They brought the Sea

Serpent into this history, re-imagined it from the sublime and their former terror, and into the comic. And so, New England society showed deep psychological insight, re-wrote their distinctiveness, and healed themselves.

And the fourth chapter, “The Sea Serpent in the Claude Mirror of Fiction” shows the phenomenon at work between 1817 and 1833 in cultural and commercial activity in New England and New York City, and argues that the Sea Serpent sighting experience was so highly desirable as a commodity that it prompted the creation of panoramas, and the performance of a pantomime in Boston. On the eve of what New York City dwellers thought was the capture of the Sea Serpent by a Captain Richard Rich at Cape Ann, a ghost show of the creature was presented at the Broadway Circus. The chapter argues further that each representation of the Sea Serpent, whether in narrative, art or drama, depicted and even magnified elements of the historical phenomenon in fictional form, and so the Sea Serpent writing attempted to “impose order on the flux of thought or experience . . .” The discourse of fact, which had in turn given rise to the large number of reports gathered between 1817 and 1819, affected the cultural dimensions of the phenomenon, and so along with a composite type, the creature also possessed a context that would create a structure for authenticity even in imaginary literature.¹⁶

¹⁶ “Fiction,” *Handbook to Literature*, Eighth Edition, William Harmon, C. Hugh Holman, eds., (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999), 212

The Sea Serpent provoked wonder and terror, much curiosity and only a little dread. He was worth his weight in gold, boasted the year-end poem in New Haven's *Connecticut Journal*, he was an ambassador en route to Washington from the court of Neptune, the *Salem Gazette* explained simultaneously. The reports often describe the observers feeling gratification when they see the Serpent, as if he had been gone for a long time and was welcome at the shore. In the proceeding chapters, we shall try to find out just what desires the Sea Serpent, monster, monarch, and leviathan of the deep, gratified.

CHAPTER 1

SEEING THE SEA SERPENT

In the summer of 1818, a number of expeditions were launched from Cape Cod and Gloucester to capture the Sea Serpent, a 50 to 180 foot-long creature that had been seen along the coasts of Massachusetts, off Gloucester and in Penobscot Bay, for at least a year, and more rarely in the same area since the 1790s. The best known of them was that of Captain Richard Rich of Boston, which continued through August and the first week of September. Before his cruise, Rich had been skeptical of the Sea Serpent's existence, but after becoming "fully satisfied in the belief of the existence of the Sea Serpent" he resolved that the "means were within the power of man, if rightly used, to overthrow this monster . . ." ¹⁷

Just prior to August 22, Rich cast his harpoon, and the creature took from them "about 20 fathoms of warp," and their vessel took a "short ride." The force brought to bear on the rope and vessel by the animal's acceleration broke "the part of the boat through which the rope passed and drew out the harpoon immediately." ¹⁸ Rich disengaged his crew at the end of the month, but was "unwilling to relinquish the undertaking," and when he found that several members of the crew he had engaged were like-minded, he organized another cruise in Gloucester and set out from Annisquam or Squam, a bay just northeast of

¹⁷ "THE SEA SERPENT, Capt. Rich's Statement—from the Boston Daily Advertiser," *Portsmouth Oracle*, [New Hampshire], 19 Sept. 1818

¹⁸ "The Sea Serpent, We have Scotch'd the Snake, not Kill'd It," *Boston Intelligencer*, 22 Aug. 1818

Gloucester, on September 1. On the 4th, Rich and his crew caught the Sea Serpent in Ipswich Bay, and hauled the creature up on Coffin's Beach. The expedition members, in their conversation with a correspondent, "represented" their catch "to be 120 to 130 feet long . . . the 'real Sea Serpent.'" Captain Rich wrote later, that he had brought in the very object "which had caused so much wonder and had excited so many speculative opinions," and so he thought that "those who were interested, would be satisfied" with the outcome of the expedition.¹⁹

Rich's catch was what is now called a blue fin tuna, then called a thunny, tunnyfish, albacore, or horse mackerel. Rich, in a widely-published open letter to the *Boston Daily Advertiser* made two claims, first, that the nine-foot-long tuna he had caught made such "a wonderful appearance by his motion in the water," that the observers claiming they had seen a fifty to one-hundred-twenty-foot-long Sea Serpent were deceived into their conclusions. And second, that his eleven-man crew, eight of whom claimed to have seen the Sea Serpent before, along with a number of people from Gloucester, agreed with his conclusion that the Sea Serpent was nothing more than a trick of human perception. The letter's claims stood in sharp contrast with contemporary essays and conclusions run in several newspapers in coastal New England, and opened a dialogue among the writers concerning human perception, and the use of testimony as a means of establishing truth. The *Essex Register*, edited by Warwick Palfray, reported that in September,

¹⁹ "THE SEA SERPENT, Capt. Rich's Statement—from the Boston Daily Advertiser," *Portsmouth Oracle*, 19 Sept. 1818;
 "The Sea Serpent—Taken," *Portsmouth Oracle*, 5 Sept. 1818;

1818, some offense was taken in Gloucester over Rich's claims about his catch being the Sea Serpent, ". . . the inhabitants of Gloucester" in their Sea Serpent reporting of the year before and then, and in their familiarity with fishing and the sea, ". . . say they could not have been capable of such deception." How, in the matter of the Sea Serpent, could the conclusions of the public be more credible than the claims of a man basing his authority on experience in the whale fishery? The answers can be found in the contemporary, public inquiry carried on in periodical literature and the willingness of the people of New England to believe in the existence of the Sea Serpent, two parts of the Sea Serpent phenomenon that were defined by the experience of seeing the Sea Serpent.²⁰

Rich attributed his success in capturing what he called "the supposed Serpent" to the highly focused, utilitarian approach he brought to his work. He maintained a turn of mind that opposed wonder against an acquisitive spirit, and this is illustrated in his letter. When he saw the Sea Serpent for the first time, he was "perfectly satisfied, so precisely did it answer the description that had been given . . . and had I never approached nearer, I could, with satisfaction to my own mind, have given testimony on oath." These terms of identification for the Sea Serpent, of it being something that conforms to some typical form or shape, are repeated often even in the earliest Sea Serpent reports of August 1817. But then, distinguishing between his approach and other expeditions and experiences of the

²⁰"THE SEA SERPENT, Capt. Rich's Statement—from the Boston Daily Advertiser," *Portsmouth Oracle*, 19 Sept. 1818

"Capt. Rich offers his opinion," *Essex Register*, 16 Sept. 1818

Sea Serpent, “We did not keep at a distance *and wonder at what we saw*²¹—our object was to take it if possible—we accordingly gave chase.”²²

This chapter will discuss sea serpent reports in terms of the lay and learned but non-scientific discourse of natural history in the Early Republic as described in Andrew J. Lewis’s *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*. It will, by way of the reports from the years 1817-1825, construct the composite type of the Sea Serpent, his structure and behavior, in order to picture accurately the expectations of New Englanders when they saw the headline, “The Sea Serpent” atop a column of text in the first half of the nineteenth-century. Then the chapter will discuss the interaction of Sea Serpent deponents with the discourse of fact in American natural history, focusing on the rhetoric of veracity in the Sea Serpent accounts of a group of Gloucester deponents in 1817, the Linnaean Society committee’s deponents, Richard Rich, James Prince and Samuel Cabot. Next, the chapter will validate the existence of a composite type by way of the public response to the Rich Expedition, which shows the operation of a “democracy of facts”²³ in the newspapers’ analysis and conclusions about Rich’s claims, and the Sea Serpent phenomenon. Because the unlearned and non-scientific inquiry into the Sea Serpent was culturally more resonant and more productive of source material than the scientific inquiry discussed in chapter two of this work, the public

²¹ The italics here are Capt. Rich’s.

²² *Portsmouth Oracle*, 19 Sept. 1818

²³ The term was coined by Benjamin Smith Barton, *A Memoir Concerning the Fascinating Faculty Which Has Been Ascribed to the Rattle Snake, and other American Serpents*, (Phila., 1796), in Andrew J. Lewis, “A Democracy of Facts, an Empire of Reason: Swallow Submersion and Natural History in the Early American Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 62 4, (Oct 2005): 670

and news editors could politely dismiss Capt. Rich's claims about his catch. The democracy of facts, which encompassed a whole perspective, tools and methods for practicing scientific inquiry by non-scientists, had, by 1825, succeeded in defining the Sea Serpent, the criteria for judging the accuracy of accounts, and how far any account would spread. Local scientific observers of the phenomenon, and most particularly the Linnaean Society of New England's committee in September, 1817, did not use the body of evidence collected by news editors, and thus the Sea Serpent reports in print throughout the phenomenon, 1817-1850, compose a democratic, lay natural historical pursuit carried on in coastal New England.

The following extends the thesis of a ramified pattern in the practice of natural history in the Early Republic proposed by Andrew J. Lewis, a professor of science, cultural and environmental history at American University in Washington, D.C., in 2011. He first elucidated his argument about a lay discourse of natural history as American nationalism in an article published in the *William and Mary Quarterly* in 2005, which became his first chapter, titled, "A Democracy of Facts, an Empire of Reason: Swallow Submersion and Natural History in the Early American Republic." One other significant secondary source on the natural history in America and the Sea Serpent phenomenon, Chandos Michael Brown's 1991 article titled "The Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent," focused on the "intellectual and cultural import" of the Sea Serpent phenomenon as a "cause célèbre" among scientists, but the culture he refers to is the one of the academy and scientific society, not the New England or American street. Brown's sources

are drawn from the academy; the sources for this chapter are drawn from the newspapers of the era, and partake of the non-scientific natural history discourse unique to the Early Republic. Lewis's argument loosens the definition of "naturalist" to include non-scientists, which is appropriate to the Sea Serpent phenomenon because most of its sources were written by non-scientists who took, for their subject in writing, a question of natural history, that is, the existence and taxonomic characteristics of the Sea Serpent. "In modern terms," Lewis stated, these "naturalists of the Early Republic were scarcely scientists at all." They "disdained systematic thinking and theory," and they "insisted that no laboratory experiment could ever count for as much as the testimony of untrained but credible observers." In terms of Lewis's thesis, and the larger group of sources this work draws upon, Brown's work, because it is confined to the limits of the academy and scientific society, is more applicable to the second chapter, which deals with the scientific inquiry into the Sea Serpent. The proceeding work will use Lewis's "democracy of facts," "discourse of fact," and naturalists to describe the non-scientific natural history unique to the Early Republic.

The subject of Lewis's 2005 article is another curiosity reported by a New Englander, Samuel Dexter, in 1785. In a letter to one of his friends that was later published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Dexter wrote that he had seen swallows trying to free themselves from the "mud of a drained pond in the spring." It seemed to Dexter, and to many contemporary observers, that while other birds migrate, the swallows would submerge

themselves into the mud of ponds and rivers, remain under the water in a torpid state, and then emerge in the spring.²⁴

Swallow submersion, unlike the Sea Serpent phenomenon, did not generate artistic, literary and dramatic expressions over a period of several decades, the stories of winter-bound, torpid and submerged birds were, according to Andrew Lewis, “a by-product of the cultural and political context of the era’s natural history,” at a time in which Americans generally were “self-consciously creating” two things, a nation and “an improved scientific practice grounded in observed fact, not abstract theory.” The Sea Serpent could be thought of as a by-product of a process of cultural and political creativity, but his appearances were not commonplace, they were rare events of the eighteenth-century that had become, for a short time, more common than before without being predictable.

Still, there are many common features between the inquiry into swallow submersion and the New England Sea Serpent. Like Sea Serpent narratives and literature, the stories of submerging swallows became more numerous in the early nineteenth-century, an expansion partly explained by the “anti-hierarchical and antitheoretical overtones of nature observation” in the Early Republic. Another explanation, just as important, was the public’s “expanding access to printed material.” Like the Sea Serpent reports, swallow submersion stories spread by way of the reprinting of one account in several periodicals, and so they intrigued

²⁴ Andrew J. Lewis. “A Democracy of Facts, An Empire of Reason: Swallow Submersion and Natural History in the Early American Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 663, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3491444> 10-2013

“people who were unaware of the theory” and confirmed others who considered it to be valid in their belief.²⁵

Sea Serpent narratives were similar in form to the literary pattern Lewis observed in the stories of swallow submersion. Generally, the narrative is not about the swallows or the serpent, but focuses at first on the writer’s presentation of himself “as a reasonable and trustworthy reporter of fact.”²⁶ In the case of Sea Serpent narratives, not just the reporter and editor claim this character; they extend it, sometimes to multiple observers and even the entire community of Gloucester in 1818, after the Rich Expedition. Usually the reports, in both cases, presented multiple testimonies in one reporting article, some newsworthy, sometimes alongside a historical report of the same or a similar thing. J.P. O’Neill, a compiler of Sea Serpent accounts, observed this pattern of the juxtaposition of historical and current accounts in the Sea Serpent reporting, and explains it as part of the “atmosphere of scientific inquiry accompanying the sightings at Gloucester.” She argues that “a number of eighteenth-century accounts were dredged from memory and offered as corroborating evidence.” The addition of the historical account to the current report, I argue, is not corroboration, as corroboration is the accumulation of evidence toward a specific instance, in this case, a Sea Serpent sighting. The historical account validates the Gloucester reports only by suggesting that the event, or something like it, has occurred before, and that the

²⁵ Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, (Phila.: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 27

²⁶ Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, 27

correspondence of elements make the veracity of the current report at least likely.²⁷

The casting of the Sea Serpent report and historical report, along with its often being printed as a segment of a compilation of contemporary reports as news, indicated the presence of democratization in the pursuit and evaluation of knowledge because it showed how every person might gratify his curiosity and become “his own expert,” through the reading of compilations of accounts, perusing facts of the phenomenon, and like the news editor, applying critical method to the features of each account such that the most consistent features might be understood and thus the public would arrive at a composite type for the Sea Serpent.²⁸

In his reading of swallow submersion stories, Lewis observed a peculiar narrative turn in them in which the reporter or editor, the “reasonable and trustworthy” individual who held an unbelieving attitude prior to his encounter with the phenomenon, has an experience with it and after some reflection, converts “from initial incredulity to a position of surprised but firm belief.” In the

²⁷ J.P. O’Neill. *The Great New England Sea Serpent, An Account of Unknown Creatures Sighted by Many Respectable Persons . . .*, 27

²⁸ Gordon S. Wood. “A World Within Themselves,” *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early American Republic, 1789-1815*, Oxford History of the United States, Vol. 4, (New York, Oxford: Oxford U P, 2009), 726-8;
Boston Gazette, 22 Oct. 1818; *Salem Gazette*, 15 Sept. 1818; compilation composed of accounts from Gloucester, MA, John Low, Capt. Corlis, John Somes, Z. Stevens, Joseph Moores, William Saville, Mrs. Rowe, Susan Storer, Lydia Wonson, by Charles Lenox Sargent in the years 1817-1818. “The Sea Serpent, Evidence About It, Testimony Collected by C.L. Sargent,” Cape Ann Museum; “Miscellany, Evidence Respecting the Sea Serpent ; (continued),” *Boston Intelligencer*, 16 Sept. 1820; compilation composed of accounts from these sources, all sightings in August, 1819, at Lynn Beach and Nahant, Jacob Phillips, James Breed, Benjamin Alley, James Prince, Samuel Cabot.

Sea Serpent narratives spanning the years 1817 to 1850, the issue of credulity is discussed in some of the commentary essays, but in the reporting, the pattern of “conversion” described above is not present, the writing centers on the editor or reporter’s reception of the report, whether spoken or written, emphasizes the character of the observer, and communicates his objective description in an unelaborated style. Francis Joy, Jr., a “respectable merchant” of Nantucket, in September, 1821, saw the Sea Serpent through an “excellent Telescope” from the south shore of the island. His story is just one tightly-focused paragraph that discloses nothing of his or the editor’s state of mind, and yet the *Rhode-Island American* and *Providence Patriot* of Providence, the *Essex Register* of Salem, Massachusetts, and the *City Gazette* of Charleston, South Carolina, thought it was worth running.²⁹

In the case of Richard Rich, the “conversion” dynamic Lewis had observed is unclearly suggested, Rich tells us that he was, before his expedition, “fully satisfied in the belief of the existence of the Sea Serpent,” even though he had “at first doubted” the idea. As Rich’s account progresses, we see the “conversion” turned on its head, and by the conclusion, Rich asserts that he had been deceived. At the start of his cruise, Rich was credulous enough to enlist the efforts of men who had seen the Sea Serpent “in order that I might not be deceived . . .” And yet deception

²⁹ Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, 27; “Sea Serpent Again,” *Rhode-Island American*, 2 Oct. 1821; “Sea Serpent,” *Essex Register* [Salem, MA], 2 Oct. 1821; “Sea Serpent Again,” *Providence Patriot*, 3 Oct. 1821; “Sea Serpent Once More,” *City Gazette*, [Charleston, SC] 26 Nov. 1821

was, at the conclusion of Rich's account, the basis of the Sea Serpent, for, in answer to the question of how the nine-foot-long horse mackerel or blue fin tuna could produce the appearance of an 80 to 150-foot-long sea serpent, he replied that " . . . his peculiar movement, added to his velocity, has produced to my eyes a greater deception than I witnessed before . . ." In the mass of Sea Serpent accounts, that of Richard Rich stands out as opposite in relation to the fact-gathering objectives of Sea Serpent reporting.³⁰

Rich's account focuses not on the Sea Serpent, the means of observation or the veracity of the writer. Instead, it is all about Rich himself, his state of mind, his perceptions alone; in other words, in a natural history practice that would privilege the use of fact over theory and favor objective over subjective description, Rich's account is useless. When he first encountered the Sea Serpent in August, 1818, in a "dead calm" and smooth water, "the much wished for" Sea Serpent appeared. The sentences proceeding do not list objectively-observed characteristics, instead, they are about the crew, who "all agreed to a man, that what we then saw was the *supposed Serpent*," and then about Rich's state of mind, "I was perfectly satisfied, so precisely did it answer the description that had been given of him." But how, precisely, did the sight answer the description formerly given? He writes no lists of his supposed or directly perceived characteristics, and so without any objective description, there is no confirming Rich's assertions by way of the most important

³⁰ "The Sea-Serpent. Capt. Rich's Statement—from the Boston Daily Advertiser," *Portsmouth Oracle*, 19 Sept. 1818

discourse in natural history of the time as practiced by non-scientists, that is, *by way of fact*. Richard Rich's facts concern himself and his experience, and nothing beyond it.³¹

The dichotomy of the democracy of facts and the world of the scientific societies, the empire of reason, is an effective means of understanding the sources and practices of natural history in the Early Republic as shown in the Sea Serpent phenomenon because the public in coastal New England were actively engaged in observing and reporting the creature, and news editors took seriously their task as compilers and analysts of sea serpent reports. Andrew J. Lewis defined natural history in the Early Republic, across the dichotomy, as "a constellation of unstable and contested practices that comprise a method of interrogating the natural world as well as a means of explaining that collected information about nature." The often-followed dynamic of observation, reporting and analysis in print appears unstable in the present day and appeared so to scientific naturalists living between 1817 and 1850. But in New England and perhaps even in the nation at this time, the natural history method of the democracy of facts appears to have satisfied the public, because, at least in the case of the Sea Serpent, few New Englanders challenged the reports and no scientist, even skeptical Samuel Mitchill of New York City, devoted his career to discrediting Sea Serpent reporting in print or anywhere else.

³¹ "The Sea-Serpent. Capt. Rich's Statement—from the Boston Daily Advertiser," *Portsmouth Oracle*, 19 Sept. 1818

Natural history, as practiced among the scientists and the public, encompassed at least three discourses, Lewis argues, method, purpose and nationalism. Considerations of method involved the process and circumstances of observation; the means of gathering and collating eyewitness testimony; the selection of appropriate literary forms, genres and rhetoric for description; and included protocols for experimentation and finally, experimentation itself. While the first three items of the list would be dominant among non-scientific naturalists, the last two are confined to scientific naturalists. In considerations of method, one conflict became impossible to ignore, the “oppositional” relationship between first-hand observation of nature and the experiment in the laboratory. In the Sea Serpent phenomenon, collated accounts remained invalidated by concrete evidence and unchallenged by experimentation; and so the Sea Serpent phenomenon was confined in the “unstable and contested” method and discourse of the democracy of facts, “a practice characterized by a prideful, excited, enthusiastic, swirling and raucous debate” in which “individual writings [are] marked by the effort to persuade the reader that the writer’s view of nature was the correct one.” Sea Serpent reporting was unique in that it began with observation, continued through collation and analysis, and ended in a literature that broadened quickly to include the objective of entertaining the reader as well as persuading the skeptic, and this feature sets the Sea Serpent apart from other natural curiosities like swallow submersion.³²

³² Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, 5, 25, 6

In order to engage the Sea Serpent through the range of different discourses he inhabited in the first half of the nineteenth-century, natural philosophers and writers had to compile and compare diligently the first descriptions written of him as he sported on the New England coast, and then traveled southward to Long Island in the fall of 1817. These are the basis for the creation of a composite type for the Sea Serpent, and a context for his behavior, both of which were necessary in the creation of expectations that would guide writers and readers in the evaluation of the credibility of future Sea Serpent writing. The reports of 1817 set his character, took his measure, and represented a consensus between the learned and lay people of coastal New England and New York. To begin an explanation of the process of the construction of the Sea Serpent type, I will define the report, and point out specific characteristics of Sea Serpent reports.

The Sea Serpent report was a printed and published document, it was usually found in a newspaper, sometimes in a magazine, and more rarely in a broadside. In its content, the report is weighted overwhelmingly toward objective description, and is written because of a specific sighting event. It answers the questions, who, what, when, where, and if possible, why and how. Most of the Sea Serpent reports written in 1817 were often run as compilations of reports, or beside historical reports, and this demonstrates the non-scientific natural history of the Early Republic. The sources for reports were sometimes quoted as excerpts from letters, conversations or sworn statements.

The format elements of Sea Serpent reports demonstrate how editors and some observer-writers mediated the reporting process by way of headlines and illustrations. Most reports and comments were written under the headline “The Sea Serpent,” as if the Sea Serpent had his own department of the paper. To “The Sea Serpent” news editors added and switched modifiers to vary the headline: “The Sea Serpent Again,”³³ “A Young Sea Serpent,”³⁴ “Our Sea Serpent,”³⁵ “Further Evidence of the Sea Serpent,”³⁶ “Old Neptune Again,”³⁷ are just a few examples. At least two reports contain images made by the observers themselves. The first is a diagram of four triangles by which Joseph Moores tried to compute the Sea Serpent’s length in 1818. The second was a widely-published open letter by James Prince to Judge John Davis, which included Prince’s own drawing of the Sea Serpent as he saw it sometime shortly before Aug. 16, 1819.³⁸

The Sea Serpent phenomenon was contemporaneous with the development of the news function and the broadening of news content in American journalism. “After the War of 1812, newspapers increasingly varied their content far beyond the traditional international and political news to include an extensive variety of new and different topics.”³⁹ News editors, by privileging objective description in the content of Sea Serpent reports and emphasizing the veracity of observers,

³³ *Rhode Island American*, 22 Oct. 1817

³⁴ *Portsmouth Oracle*, 4 Oct. 1817

³⁵ *Essex Register*, 23 Aug. 1817

³⁶ *Essex Register*, 1 Sept. 1819

³⁷ *Salem Gazette*, 21 Jul. 1818

³⁸ “Testimony of John Low,” *Boston Gazette*, 22 Oct. 1818;

“Copy of a Letter from James Prince, Esq.” *Boston Gazette*, 26 Aug. 1819;

³⁹ Carol Sue Humphrey, *The Press of the Young Republic: 1783-1833*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 144

consciously reinforced the point that these items were news in spite of their content. Many Sea Serpent reports circulated widely, and editors in this period seem to have been sensitive about being perceived as purveyors of hoaxes and tall tales, and so they often marked out their stance carefully in relation to the stories they published about the Sea Serpent.

The news function in American journalism was in a process of development, having been preceded by a period, beginning in the 1790s, in which a newspaper was first, a collection of articles culled from other periodicals, second, a catalogue of current prices and ship news for merchants and third, a tool of political organization and advocacy. "Historical developments altered journalism as an occupation and social institution, and they altered the nature of news as its sources, styles, forms, and substance changed with cultural trends." Considerations of newsworthiness and timeliness in content changed journalistic practice in the second decade of the nineteenth-century when "shared journalistic notions of news values" became apparent and "innovative methods of news gathering were tried and new stress was placed on the timeliness of news items." Up to the mid-nineteenth-century, the newspaper was an undifferentiated institution in terms of labor; the printer, editor and reporter were usually the same person, and first-hand news-gathering consisted of no more than attending legislative proceedings and transcribing them. Most other news-gathering was done through correspondence and re-printing articles found in other newspapers. They circulated mostly through the mails and through subscription, though it is vital to understand that their

readership greatly outnumbered their subscribers, “many people, (possibly as many as twenty) read most individual copies of a newspaper.”⁴⁰ In 1811, a coffee-house owner and printer in Boston who published news for his patrons began a practice that spread rapidly afterward. He hired rowboats to approach and gather information from the crews of incoming ships. The rowers would return to the publisher before the ships docked. After the War of 1812, new considerations, “prominence, proximity, and local and human interest” came to influence the editorial process, and so the content of news broadened to include Sea Serpent writing of both the journalistic and literary casts.⁴¹

Similarly, the position of the editor of the newspaper in particular changed over the course of the Revolution and Early Republic. During the Revolution, most of the material of the newspaper came from other newspapers, and the editor was just the member of the community who had the skills and responsibility for printing such content as came his way. In the 1780s, occasional commentary from editors became part of news, and in the 1790s, such commentary became “commonplace as the newspaper business became more complicated and as the national political situation encouraged comments from the press.” In spite of the demise of the Federalist Party and the creation of a virtual one-party state post 1815, editors continued writing as political advocates. By the 1820s, the influence of editors on the political scene was readily apparent, as “many people came to see the influence

⁴⁰ Carol Sue Humphrey, *The Press of the Young Republic: 1783-1833*, , 135

⁴¹ Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards In Nineteenth-Century America*, (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 19, 25-27

of such writings on the general populace.” And so, it is fair to say that editors, given their place in national and local political discourse, had a vested interest in preserving and enhancing their credibility. Despite their concerns for the public image of themselves and their newspapers, the Sea Serpent was credible enough that these professional communicators felt it necessary to run the reports.⁴²

Part of the project of enhancing editorial credibility on the subject of the Sea Serpent was the privileging of objective description and the statements of veracity to the public on the characters of Sea Serpent correspondents and observers. Central also to editorial credibility and the new, fact-based American natural history was the accumulation of multiple reports containing the same or strikingly similar elements of description. The body of Sea Serpent reports carried in the newspapers of New England and New York City did not disappoint in rounding out these objectives, for they have a powerful set of common characteristics, and these compose the Sea Serpent’s composite type, which was arrived at in 1817 off the coasts of Essex County. Proceeding from here is a listing of characteristics of the phenomenon as reported in newspapers, beginning with the name of the animal, the first definitive statements of what was seen, how the primary sources themselves suggest the existence of a composite type for the Sea Serpent, and then, one by one, the elements of physical description that make it up, gender, size, shape, coloring, movement, and behavior.

⁴² Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards In Nineteenth-Century America*, 25; Carol Sue Humphrey, *The Press of the Young Republic: 1783-1833*, 135, 139, 140, 141

The Sea Serpent was first reported not by newspapers, but by several observers in Gloucester in the first two weeks of August, 1817. Some of these reports were printed in a broadside in late August, 1817 and more with additions in October, 1818. They were preserved by a local author, Charles Lenox Sargent, who wanted to write his own work about the phenomenon, but died before he could do so. The first news report of the Sea Serpent was run under no headline in the *Essex Register* of Salem on August 16, "Yesterday information was received in this town from Gloucester, of the appearance of an unusual fish in their harbor." The *Salem Gazette* soon followed on August 19th with a report titled, "Sea Serpent," that began, "For some days past, there has been in the harbour of Gloucester an uncommon sea animal, which from the accounts given of it, seems to be of the serpent kind." Soon afterward, the "unusual fish" or "sea animal" came to be identified with "the serpent kind," a phrase often repeated in the eleven source accounts transcribed in the *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England Concerning A Large Marine Animal . . .*, published in December, 1817. Like the accounts collected by Charles Lenox Sargent, these were partially published once in the *Salem Gazette* in September, 1818, but were not published anywhere else. The *Essex Register's* second story, "The Sea Monster!" was widely published under that title, but the "Sea Serpent," headline the *Salem Gazette* employed for its initial report was the most repeated in the following months. On August 22, the broadside referred to above was published in Boston bearing the title, "A Monstrous Sea Serpent, the largest ever seen in America, has just made its

appearance in Gloucester harbour, Cape Ann, and has been seen by hundreds of Respectable Citizens.” The Sea Serpent had a name, a place and even an easily imagined scene, to define it in the reader’s mind, the following characteristics composed the appearance the creature made.⁴³

Reports of more than one Sea Serpent being seen at a time are extremely rare, more often than not, just one appeared, and while the *Salem Gazette* commented in their year-end poem for 1817, “naturalists their noodles vex, trying to ascertain its sex.” Unlike the poem, most of the reports call the creature male or female according to its situation, only the very first reports in the *Essex Register* and *Salem Gazette*, reports reprinted all over New England and New York City, called the creature “it.” In their initial report, the *Connecticut Courant* of Hartford reported that “it is described as having its head . . . at times out of water.”⁴⁴

The editor, having paraphrased the content of the *Essex Register*’s initial report published on August 16, 1817, appended a second part to his article copied verbatim from the *Salem Gazette*’s initial report that shifted the creature’s sex from “it” to “he.” The article now said that “he appeared to them [certain gentlemen of Gloucester] of greater magnitude than had been before represented” and there was a proposal to set a line of “strong nets, in the hope of entangling and embarrassing him, as to be able to get him into a situation to kill him.” When

⁴³ “A Monstrous Sea Serpent, the largest ever seen in America . . .,” Boston: Bowen, 1817, Broadside, S4143, *Early American Imprints II*, Shaw-Shoemaker, Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 2004

⁴⁴ “Address of the Carriers of the Salem Gazette to its Patrons,” *Salem Gazette*, 1 Jan. 1818 ; *Connecticut Courant* [Hartford, CT], 26 Aug. 1817

Abraham Cummings was deposed about his 1802 sighting on Penobscot Bay, first reported to a collector of Sea Serpent accounts, he gendered the Sea Serpent male. “Samuel Simpleton,” editor of the *Idiot, or, Invisible Rambler* in Boston wrote in May, 1818, that “Printers of Newspapers ought to hail the arrival of their *old visitor* with gladsome hearts, as—his prodigious length—apparent strength—rapid ‘serpentine movements’—the plans to decoy him, and projects to destroy him, &c, will afford matter enough . . . to fill . . . half a column at least of our papers . . .” Simpleton’s tone, which is repeated in other works in the *Idiot, or, Invisible Rambler* about the phenomenon, indicates a kind of man to man rivalry between the would-be harpooners or capturers in coastal New England and the Sea Serpent that will not be put down by courage or skill.⁴⁵

As a female, the Sea Serpent seems to have provoked less laughter and more fear than the more common male. In the reports, the Sea Serpent is gendered female when “she” is accompanied by smaller sea serpents in two reports from 1818. The first, titled “Sea Serpent Again and Brood,” came from an unnamed correspondent in Gloucester and included the reports of two people a Mr. Sargent in a vessel and a Captain Webber on shore. The “Great Sea Serpent has again appeared in our harbor. She is accompanied by three young ones, and they make great destruction among the bait. . . the fish spring above the water to escape their

⁴⁵ *Connecticut Courant* [Hartford, CT] 26 Aug. 1817;
Salem Gazette, 19 Sept. 1817;
Vermont Centinel, 5 Sept. 1817;
Essex Register, 1 Aug. 1818;
 “Postscript,” *Idiot, or, Invisible Rambler*, 16 May 1818

enemies, but in vain, for the Serpents pass and repass, devouring as they go.” As the mother Serpent “passed under his boat,” Sargent saw that “the head and protuberances resemble the drawing and engraving of Capt. BEACH.” On shore, Captain Webber stated that the mother was 100 feet long, the infants were each 50 feet long.⁴⁶ A report from Rockaway Beach and run in the *Essex Register* on August 1, 1818, started with “An Express arrived in town last night to announce the appearance of the SEA SERPENT, and her two young ones.” The writer surmised that “monsters of the deep” would probably remain in that region because of the “large schools of fish which of late have been hovering on the Rockaway shore.” The mother Serpent and children, perhaps the same ones that appeared a few days before in New England less one infant, elicited a fearful response from bathers on the beach, who, we are told, “were so much alarmed that they literally flew over the sand till they reached a place of safety.”⁴⁷

The size of the Sea Serpent was stated in terms of length and width, with the width being more certain than the length. Even in the only two Sea Serpent reports published in the 1790s, and in most published afterward, the width of the animal is consistently estimated to be “about the size of a barrel.”⁴⁸ The use of the word barrel refers to not only the object, but also a specific English unit of measure that

⁴⁶ “Sea Serpent Again and Brood,” *Boston Recorder*, 28 Jul. 1818; *Boston Gazette*, 27 Jul. 1818; *Columbian Centinel* [Boston, MA], 25 Jul. 1818

⁴⁷ *Essex Register*, 1 Aug. 1818

⁴⁸ “Sea Monster,” *American Apollo*, 16 Aug. 1793; *Impartial Herald*, 6 Sept. 1796

would have been familiar to people living in coastal New England.⁴⁹ Observers of the Sea Serpent were often confused about its length because they were observing a moving animal whose body was only partially out of water at any given time, and so the Sea Serpent's length estimates are as small as forty-five to fifty feet, "it shews a length of 50 feet within a quarter of a mile from the shore," the *Essex Register* reported, and length estimates grew as the Sea Serpent entered Gloucester harbor, approaching the shore and spectators more nearly. People who were standing within ten or fifteen yards of him estimated that he was sixty to seventy feet long, yet others "state his length variously, from 50 to 100 feet." The *Essex Register* concluded that even though accounts of the Sea Serpent's length varied in 1817, all agreed that it was great.⁵⁰

At least two Sea Serpent viewers tried to use geometric measurements to determine the Sea Serpent's length. James Prince, who saw the Sea Serpent in August, 1819, tried to use triangulation to measure the creature, "thinking I might form some calculation of his length by the time and distance of each turn; and taking an angle with my two hands of the length he exhibited, that is to say, from his head to his last protuberance, and applying the same angle to other objects, I feel satisfied of the correctness of my decision, that he is sixty feet long . . ." In a compilation of reports from Gloucester that was run in the Boston Gazette on

⁴⁹ The traditional English wine barrel held 31.5 gallons or 119.24 liters of fluid. <http://www.unc.edu/~rowlett/units/dictB.html#barrel> Russ Rowlett; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Accessed Jan. 26, 2012

⁵⁰ "A Monstrous Sea Serpent . . ." Broadside, attributed to the *Salem Gazette*; *Essex Register* [Salem, MA] 16 Aug. 1817

October 22, 1818, Joseph Moores drew a diagram, reproduced on the next page, of four triangles in order to ascertain the Sea Serpent's length.⁵¹

The language used to describe the Sea Serpent's length, as demonstrated above, employs not rough comparison, but units and mathematical means of measure, and so we can see that the coastal New Englanders who edited and contributed to these news reports appear to have been conscious of their role in the new practices composing natural history in the new nation. One of the chief characteristics of the practice of natural history by non-scientist Americans in the Early Republic, a discourse Andrew Lewis called the democracy of facts, was the idea that any person in possession of acute senses and a sound mind had the same experience of nature as the scientific natural historian, and therefore, lay observers had as much to contribute to natural history as the learned, just as long as they were confident "that the senses had not been compromised to compel belief." Americans viewed the more deductive and speculative scientific work of systematization and theory with suspicion; they harbored the thought that the uniqueness of the American contribution to natural history would assume the form of taking the measures and compiling information about their new world. The composite type of the Sea Serpent demonstrates the American natural history discourse of fact at work.⁵²

⁵¹ James Prince, "Copy of a Letter from James Prince," *Boston Gazette*, 26 Aug. 1819
 "Testimony of John Low," *Boston Gazette*, 22 Oct. 1818

⁵² Andrew J. Lewis, *Democracy of Facts*, 34

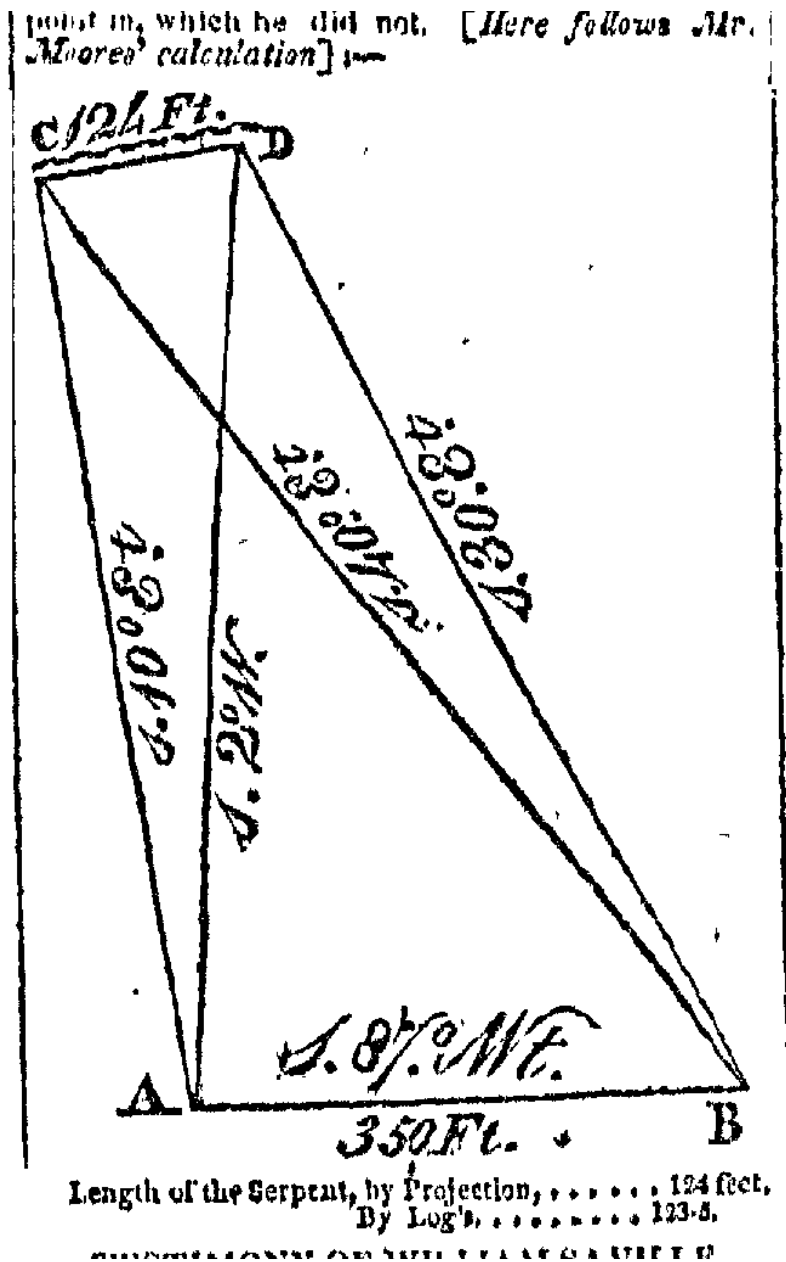


Figure 1, Joseph Moores' drawing as it appeared in the *Boston Gazette* on Oct. 22, 1818

Less exact was the language used to describe the Sea Serpent's shape, beginning with the animal's head. Several reports from Salem and Boston between the years 1817 and 1820 tell us that the Sea Serpent's head was shaped like that of

a horse.⁵³ The *Boston Daily Advertiser* added that though the creature's head was not flat "like a common serpent's, but the top is elevated, prominent, and round, and owing to this . . . a side view of his head a little resembles that of a dog's."⁵⁴

The shape of the Sea Serpent's body as he moved through the water was a series of mounds with the head slightly elevated. The bends in the Serpent's back that appeared as small mounds on the water were often called "protuberances" in newspaper reports. The Linnaean Society of New England's report described the Sea Serpent's back as "jointed, or like a number of buoys or casks following each other in a line," and this description was accordant with the initial reports of the *Essex Register* and *Salem Gazette*, both of which stated that the Sea Serpent's shape was "like a string of gallon kegs 100 feet long."⁵⁵ At least one report argued that the protuberances were not solid features of the animal, like camel's humps or organs of flotation, but were brought about only by its manner of swimming, "he does not wind laterally along, as serpents commonly do, but his motion is undulatory, or consisting in alternate rising and depression, somewhat like the motion of a caterpillar." About one year later, Abraham Cummings, the clergyman who allowed himself to be deposed then for a sighting event he experienced in

⁵³ *Salem Gazette*, 17 Jul. 1818;
Salem Gazette, 19 Aug. 1817;
Essex Register [Salem, MA], 16 Aug. 1817;
Boston Intelligencer, 16 Sept. 1820;
Essex Register [Salem, MA], 20 Aug. 1817

⁵⁴ *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 21 Aug. 1817

⁵⁵ John Davis, Jacob Bigelow, Francis C. Gray, *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England, Relative to a Large Marine Animal, Supposed to be a Serpent, seen near Cape Ann, Massachusetts in August 1817*, (Boston: Cummings and Hilliard, 1817), 1;
Essex Register, [Salem, MA] 16 Aug. 1817;
Salem Gazette, 19 Aug. 1817

1802, agreed that the Sea Serpent's motion was "not purely serpentine, but undulatory."⁵⁶

Observers took much note of the Sea Serpent's agility, his directional movements were varied and fascinating. Occasionally, the creature was found to be motionless, but most often, he was seen in rapid, even darting motion. In a 1793 report, that was reprinted in 1817, Eleazar Crabtree stated that he had seen "the greatest agility and quickness of motion" in the Sea Serpent. Subsequent accounts from 1817 agreed, and then augmented Crabtree's description with more specific statements about the creature's movement. Lydia Wonson observed in August, 1817 that the Sea Serpent would draw himself up "into a coil," and then extends his body again, and on another occasion in August, 1817, a Mrs. Rowe observed that he "turned suddenly, his head going one way and his tail the other."⁵⁷ The *Essex Register* reported that the Sea Serpent moved rapidly "in all directions," and similarly, the *Connecticut Courant* report of August 26, 1817 said, "it frequently forms circles in its movements." The Sea Serpent was capable of, and seemed even to like making rapid hairpin turns on the water, "he often turns very quick," the *Boston Daily Advertiser* reported, bringing his head near his tail and putting himself into the form of a staple."⁵⁸ Furthermore, observers in 1817 also

⁵⁶ *Boston Recorder*, 26 Aug. 1817;

Essex Register, [Salem, MA], 1 Aug. 1818

⁵⁷ "The Sea-Monster!" *Essex Register*, [Salem, MA], 20 Aug. 1817;

Boston Gazette, "Testimony of Lydia Wonson," 22 Oct. 1818;

Boston Gazette, "Testimony of Mrs. Rowe," 22 Oct. 1818

⁵⁸ *Essex Register* [Salem, MA], 16 Aug. 1817;

Connecticut Courant [Hartford, CT] 26 Aug. 1817;

reported the Sea Serpent made certain darting motions “at the rate of a mile in 3 minutes leaving a wake behind of half a mile in length.” When the Sea Serpent submerged, he would plunge or sink directly down into the water. Samuel Cabot, in a published letter to merchant Thomas Handasyd Perkins and published in the *Boston Intelligencer* stated that the Sea Serpent’s “motion was sometimes very rapid, and he would dart under water with great velocity, as in the act of seizing prey.”⁵⁹

Another feature of the 1817 accounts that would have defined reader expectations was the Sea Serpent’s coloring. The creature’s color was described in August, 1817 as “mixed black and white” on its head, “its head was partly white,” the *Boston Gazette* stated.⁶⁰ The group of observers in Gloucester whose accounts were printed in “A Monstrous Sea-Serpent, the largest ever seen in America . . .” and preserved by Charles Lenox, along with Eleazar Crabtree, James Prince and Samuel Cabot, had no description of coloring in their accounts. Among the deponents to the Linnaean Society’s committee chaired by Judge John Davis in 1817 whose accounts were published about one year afterward by the *Salem Gazette*, only the merchant William H. Foster and mariner Matthew Gaffney, both of Gloucester, disclosed his coloring as “shaded with light colours,” and “the whole of

Boston Daily Advertiser, 21 Aug. 1817

⁵⁹ “A Monstrous Sea Serpent . . .”;

Boston Gazette, “Testimony of William Saville,” 22 Oct. 1818;

“A Monstrous Serpent . . .”

“For the Boston Intelligencer, Miscellany,” *Boston Intelligencer*, 16 Sept. 1820

⁶⁰ “Sea Serpent,” *Salem Gazette*, 19 Aug. 1817;

“Something New,” *Boston Gazette*, 18 Aug. 1817;

his belly was nearly white,” respectively. A minister on board the U.S. Navy Schooner, *Science*, Cheever Felch, stated in a published letter that the creature was a “dark brown, or rather mud color.”⁶¹

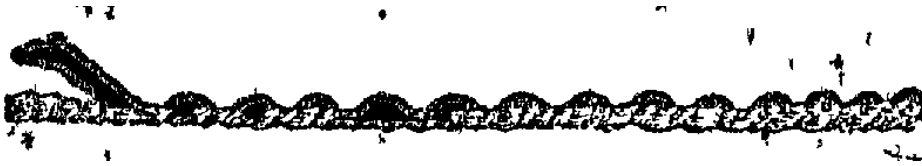


Figure 2, Drawing of James Prince, published August 26, 1819, in the *Boston Gazette*.

The Sea Serpent’s temper and response to the adulation, particularly between 1817 and 1825, was indifferent and even forbearing. The reporting of this adulation shows a paradox in the early public responses to the presence of the Sea Serpent in Gloucester harbor. One correspondent to the *Essex Register* wrote that in Gloucester, in mid August, 1817, the street was “full of persons who are going to enjoy the sight of it”⁶² and yet at the same time, the same report says of the same people that they “were determined in their attempts to take it, and a large sum had been offered for it.”⁶³ Two shots were fired at him, both hit his head, according to the *Essex Register*, and the creature retreated,⁶⁴ refusing to meet force with force.

Behavioral observations required a more inductive approach, and so were difficult to make in August, 1817, but reports made then concluded that most of the

⁶¹ “From the Boston Daily Advertiser, The Sea Serpent,,,” *Salem Gazette*, 15 Sept. 1818; “The Sea-Serpent,” *Boston Intelligencer*, 11 Sept. 1819

⁶² *Essex Register* [Salem, MA], 16 Aug. 1817

⁶³ *Essex Register* [Salem, MA] 16 Aug. 1817

⁶⁴ *Essex Register* [Salem, MA] 16 Aug. 1817

time, the creature was “playing,”⁶⁵ “sporting,”⁶⁶ or “reposing”⁶⁷ in the water. The author of the broadside “A Monstrous Sea Serpent, the Largest Ever Seen in America . . .” made the conjecture that the creature “has resorted to this harbor [Gloucester] for the purpose of preying upon a . . . shoal of herrings.” The *Salem Gazette* cautiously asserted that “there were . . . schools of bait about him, and it appears evident that he follows them.”⁶⁸ The *Eastern Argus* of Portland, Massachusetts, was confident about the Sea Serpent’s feeding behavior, writing that on Saturday, September 6, 1817, he “was found coiled up in a serpent form, reposing, in conscious security, after a hearty breakfast of fresh herrings.”⁶⁹

Observations of the creature’s personality are rare. James Prince, who was viewing the Sea Serpent from Nahant and Lynn in August, 1819, wrote that as he observed the creature in the water with a number of rowboats in the area, he wrote that “the noise of those oars must have disturbed him, as he appeared to us to be a harmless, timid animal.”⁷⁰

The comments written as early as August 23, 1817, show a certain familiarity with the animal, as when the *Essex Register* reflected, “Our Sea Serpent, as he is called . . . has actually received herrings when offered to him. We have

⁶⁵ *Essex Register* [Salem, MA] 16 Aug. 1817;

Salem Gazette, 19 Aug. 1817;

⁶⁶ *Boston Gazette*, 18 Aug. 1817;

⁶⁷ *Eastern Argus* [Portland MA, ME], 16 Sept. 1817

⁶⁸ “A Monstrous Sea Serpent . . .”;

Salem Gazette, 12 Sept. 1817

⁶⁹ *Eastern Argus* [Portland MA, ME], 16 Sept. 1817

⁷⁰ “Copy of a Letter from James Prince, Esq.,” *Boston Gazette*, 26 Aug. 1819

been promised a view of him as he appears at his ease upon the water.”⁷¹ In spite of the facetiously promised view, the comment also expresses a Burkean approach to novel objects that suggests its sublimity,, as a desire to draw the creature “into some cove” and examine him, for then, “the article under which he appears would be something besides a name with uncommon fear in it.”⁷² By early September, 1817 the same newspaper acknowledged the Sea Serpent as, at least, a partially-known thing, “he appears much at his ease in the neighborhood, quite content with the fare he finds, and taking nothing but what he finds free in the Ocean.”⁷³ On September 23, the *Vermont Gazette* of Bennington also acknowledged the Sea Serpent’s fishing prowess and enthusiastic appetite, and warned that if the creature, having come from an American port, should travel northward to Halifax, Nova Scotia for fish, “His Britannic Majesty’s naval commanders . . . would certainly attempt his capture,” and if they succeeded, they would send him into the Admiralty court “on a charge of a violation of the treaty of Ghent.”⁷⁴

Observers and editors approached the Sea Serpent reports as serious documents of natural history, but their personal perspectives were not enough to create respectability for their Sea Serpent inquiries among the public. Each report had to employ rhetoric of veracity to convince the reader that the observer and the editor might be fused into the type of Andrew Lewis’s “reasonable and trustworthy reporter of fact.” The rhetoric of veracity was constructed in terms of the individual

⁷¹ *Essex Register* [Salem, MA] 23 Aug. 1817

⁷² *Essex Register* [Salem, MA] 23 Aug. 1817

⁷³ *Essex Register* [Salem, MA], 6 Sept. 1817

⁷⁴ *Vermont Gazette* [Bennington, VT], 23 Sept. 1817

observer and expressed with adverbs such as “distinctly,” and “plainly,” toward the purpose of convincing the reader that the observer is an alert and clear-headed individual in possession of accurate senses, the only tools required for natural history practice according to the discourse of fact.⁷⁵

Among Charles Lenox Sargent’s deponents, some wrote something about their own state of mind and the process of observation. John Somes “distinctly observed” the Sea Serpent “pass repeatedly across the harbour.” He “plainly saw his humps but did not count them.” Joseph Moores stated that he could “plainly see one part of” the Sea Serpent “move one way, and the other part in a contrary direction, preserving a continuity of the parts from one end to the other.” Mrs. Rowe was “confident she saw 100 feet [of the Sea Serpent] on the surface of the water . . .,” and Susan Storer also saw the “Serpent very plainly, and close to the shore . . .”⁷⁶ In the same issue of the *Boston Gazette* that printed the Lenox accounts, the editor ran a miscellaneous piece of commentary on the veracity of the accounts. He observed that the “southern prints” had been writing much facetiae at the expense of “our neighbors in the respectable town of Gloucester,” and so he was gladdened to “substantiate the fact of its existence in the shape, dimensions and character, as heretofore represented.” The editor also stated that “the persons who now come forward with their testimonials on the subject, are

⁷⁵ Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, 27

⁷⁶ “Testimony of John Somes,” *Boston Gazette*, 22 Oct. 1818;

“Testimony of Joseph Moores, *Boston Gazette*, 22 Oct. 1818;

“Testimony of Mrs. Rowe, *Boston Gazette*, 22 Oct. 1818;

“Testimony of Susan Storer,” *Boston Gazette*, 22 Oct. 1818

personally known to the Editor of this paper, as respectable and intelligent members of society: -- . . .”⁷⁷

The message is very clear, there is an inquiry going on, certain accounts are more authoritative than others, and the authors and bringers of those who are so privileged, will, in their reputations, be protected by the editor. So here the democracy of facts is shown to be democratic, but not permissive in practice. Certain accounts, within one year of the first sightings, had become, by way of their persuasiveness and usefulness in constructing the composite type and in their rhetoric of veracity, canonical. One of the chief objectives of the democracy of facts, Andrew Lewis argues, was encouraging the prevalence of truth “in a period sensitive to the operation of secret agendas and the discovery of hidden interests in politics and economics . . .” It was thought that, in natural history as well as in other discourses of knowledge and power, “a transparent, fact-based method had the benefit of exposing and eliminating the problems of individual subjectivity and political prejudices.” New England editors and writers employed a fact-based method in constructing the ground of expectation built by the sighting accounts of 1817. After the incongruous fiasco of the Rich Expedition prompted New England editors to draw boundaries in the natural history discourse of the Sea Serpent, and to assert that the only Sea Serpent in New England was the one answering the 1817

⁷⁷ “Miscellany, For the Boston Gazette, The Great Sea Serpent,” *Boston Gazette*, 22 Oct. 1818

composite type described by the Linnaean Society of New England and Sargent's deponents.⁷⁸

James Prince, in his own account, enhanced his veracity by demonstrating that as an observer he had certain limits. He reflected upon some of the contested aspects of the Sea Serpent composite type in relation to his own encounter, writing that "whether, however, the wake might not add to the appearance of his length; or whether the undulation on the water or his peculiar manner of propelling himself might not cause the appearances of protuberances, I leave to your better judgment." Concerning his own state of mind, he writes, that his "first view of the animal occasioned some agitation, and the novelty prevented that precise discrimination which afterwards took place." Prince, like the Sargent deponents described above, used a good glass, his "*mast head spyglass*," and "saw him [the Sea Serpent] distinctly" as the animal turned and swam.⁷⁹

Samuel Cabot, in his published letter of August 19, 1820, to T.H. Perkins, wrote of his own Sea Serpent experiences on Lynn Beach and at Nahant, that "he happened to see it under favorable circumstances of position and distance, for forming an accurate judgment." The account continued in Cabot's own words, which show us a methodical and conscious process of perception. "My attention was suddenly arrested by an object emerging from the water at a distance of about one hundred to one hundred fifty yards" that "gave to my mind at the first glance

⁷⁸ Andrew. J. Lewis, "A Democracy of Facts, An Empire of Reason . . .," 670

⁷⁹ "Copy of a Letter from James Prince, Esq. Marshal of this District, . . ., *The Yankee* [Boston, MA], 26 Aug. 1819

the idea of a horse's head." Cabot tells us that he ranged along with his eyes and soon saw "at a short distance, eight or ten regular bunches or protuberances, and at a short interval three or four more." The distance and time are described in a beautiful parallel sentence. After Cabot was satisfied that he was seeing the Serpent, he applied himself to the task of investigating the appearance as accurately as possible. He started with the head, which, "I satisfied myself, was serpent-shaped . . ." and moved to the chin, "which appeared to be hollow underneath," and continued with the animal's body. To ascertain the Sea Serpent's length, Cabot, like Prince, decided to use some basic triangulation, "I directed my eye to several whale boats, one of which was beyond him, and by comparing the relative length, and I calculated that the distance from the animal's head to the last protuberance I had noticed, would be equal to about five of those boats." When he returned to Nahant, two to three hours later, Cabot stated that the Sea Serpent "must [then] have been seen by at least two or three hundred persons on the beach and on the heights on each side . . ." ⁸⁰

The exceptional work in this constellation of accounts is that of Richard Rich, who, in lieu of a list of objective-descriptive characteristics, stated that the Sea Serpent he saw on his cruise in August, 1818 answered "precisely" a "description that have been given of him" but never attributes or rewrites the description the creature answered. Rich stated that he was "ready to answer verbally any questions" he might be asked, provided the interrogators would do him "the justice

⁸⁰ "For the Boston Intelligencer, Miscellany," *Boston Intelligencer*, 16 Sept. 1820

as to say that I have used no deception.” Only in Rich’s account does the issue of deception arise, and it does three times. He tells us that in selecting a crew, he chose men “of respectability and integrity,” some of whom had “seen the supposed Serpent,” and, in addition, had “made oath to the account already published,” without providing any more specific information about the “account” in question. The reader may fairly ask, was it Rich’s or someone else’s?

Rich’s subject in writing was himself, not the Sea Serpent and the objective facts concerning the creature. The tool Rich uses in the rhetoric of his veracity is not composed of the adverbs, “plainly” or “distinctly” modifying the act of perception, where there is nothing, there is no need to perceive at all. His story, therefore, is of his cruise, his state of mind, his choice to be a skeptic, and his procedure in convincing the public that his skepticism is the only correct view of the Sea Serpent. The creature is, right from the start, the “supposed Serpent,” and nothing more. What else, therefore, can Rich write about? All he has left is himself, a tuna carcass and his crew. As a writer, he produces a narrative heavily tinted by subjective prejudices and permeated with self-interest; as an entrepreneur of the new natural history, he exhibited a nine-foot long carcass that he claimed was the Sea Serpent by way of a perceptual trick. Unlike every other Sea Serpent observer, Rich saw nothing plainly or distinctly. As a would-be entrant into the American natural history discourse, and the democracy of facts, his contribution left much to be desired, and this fact was not lost on several editors of newspapers in Salem, Boston, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Part of natural history practice in the Early Republic was the exhibition of natural objects, both commonplace and curious. In his expedition, and in exhibiting his catch, as well as in the rhetoric of his writing, Richard Rich had immersed himself so deeply into the democracy of facts, that he had become invested in the Sea Serpent in spite of his skepticism. The announcement run in the *Boston Gazette* for his exhibit shouted from the page: “*Sea Serpent or No Sea Serpent! Albicore! Tunny Fish! Horse Mackerel! Or what you please to call it.* The large, curious and uncommon FISH caught by Capt. *Rich*, while in pursuit of the Sea Serpent, and supposed by him to be the *Old Sea Serpent himself*, is now deposited at THE NEW-ENGLAND MUSEUM . . . for the inspection of the curious.” When a mariner and his crew caught some large creature, most often a whale, in the waters of the New England coast, it was not unusual to display it in a museum or other venue and to charge the viewers a small fee for the novel experience of seeing a curiosity up close.⁸¹ The exhibition began on September 5, and generated a blizzard of contemptuous humor, reflection and comment on the quality of evidence in natural history in New England, the basis of Rich’s authority, and his assertions about the Sea Serpent.⁸²

⁸¹ *Salem Gazette*, “Darby, Did You Ever See A Whale?” 25 Aug. 1818

⁸² Andrew J. Lewis, “A Democracy of Facts, An Empire of Reason,” 675
Boston Gazette, 1 Oct. 1818;
New England Palladium [Boston, MA], 25 Sept. 1818



Figure 3, Logo-like woodcut that frequently topped Sea Serpent articles in *The Idiot*, or, *Invisible Rambler*, 5 Sept. 1818, Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society

In spite of Rich's claim that he had no intention of duping the public, the mundaneness of his narrative, and his repeated assertions of skepticism post exhibit, "many went away feeling they'd been hoaxed." The feeling of deep intellectual dissatisfaction is evident in the essays written in between September 5 and 15, 1818. The newspaper that followed the Rich Expedition's outcome most closely and was the first to report Rich's success, and the first to run Rich's account in mid-September, was the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, edited by Nathan Hale, who also owned and edited the *Boston Weekly Messenger*. "We lament in common with the public," the paper began on Sept. 5, "the disappointment of the hopes that had been raised by the report of the capture of this remarkable animal. . . . The intelligence of the capture . . . and the assurance of some of the crew, who either believed, or wished others to believe," that the Sea Serpent had been caught, "occasioned a general belief that the leviathan of the deep had yielded to the skill

and enterprise of our seamen.” Could the blue fin tuna, the “Thunny or Horse Mackerel” Rich had caught, “or any number of them, be the monster so described as a Sea Serpent? We answer, decidedly no.” While these words were only written once, their dismissive sound echoed in the democracy of facts, as they were printed many times in many places, and so their effect was strong; the printing press was, in this case, mightier than the harpoon. When Richard Rich was given the opportunity to write his own account, he had much more than just this editorial comment to counter.⁸³

In addition, the objection had been raised that the existence of the Sea Serpent was an issue having to do with the quality of reports as accumulated, and did not hinge upon the words of one adventurer and his crew. Here, the *Boston Daily Advertiser* contrasted the reports of 1817 and 1818, characterizing the latter as “less consistent and satisfactory, and undoubtedly exaggerated,” than those of 1817, which were the “most satisfactory testimony” of the Sea Serpent’s existence. Still, neither exaggeration nor error on the part of observers, reporters and even mistaken pursuers, should “lead us to suspect all former testimony.” And thus began an editorial turn toward a period of reflection in the Sea Serpent phenomenon in the autumn of 1818.⁸⁴

A second point the article makes in relation to natural history and the discourse of fact is in its suggestion that in 1818, the perceptions of people living in

⁸³ J.P. O’Neill, *The Great New England Sea Serpent*, (Maine: Down East Books, 1999), 60-64; “The Sea Serpent,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, Sept. 5, 1818;

⁸⁴ *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 5 Sept. 1818

the communities of coastal Massachusetts might be skewed by a certain interest in the creature and enthusiasm at the prospect of seeing him again. Though “various animals of large size have been described in our newspapers under the name of sea serpent . . . in most instances, [these were] evidently distinct from the animal of 1817.” The sighting narratives from May through July 1818, particularly two widely-circulated hoaxes, seem to bear the assumption out.⁸⁵

Another article published in the same newspaper five days later, signed by an A.B., took for its subject the Rich Expedition and the thought processes he found at work among ordinary people in the five days after it. People who “disdain the trouble of thinking,” the writer observed, were “disposed to sneer because some individuals, after an unsuccessful cruise, mistook an animal to them *unknown*, for the extraordinary production . . . supposed to have visited our coasts last year.” The article reminded readers that most of the world, “seven eights of all the vegetable world and two thirds of the animal creation” was, until the eighteenth-century, unknown to naturalists, and so “those who have sense enough to examine evidence . . . will not reject without due examination the solid mass of evidence, collected and fairly displayed by the Linnaean Society, [in] the last year.” Here is the democracy of facts at work in an expression of confidence that the examination of evidence and the accumulation of facts, and not clouding one’s mind with

⁸⁵ *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 5 Sept. 1818

speculation with theory or systematization, will yield useful natural historical knowledge.⁸⁶

As Nathan Hale of the *Boston Daily Advertiser* was reflecting calmly on the differences between the nine-foot horse mackerel and the 120 to 130 foot-long Sea Serpent reported by Mr. Dresser, along with the differences between the observations of 1817 and the more imaginative reports of 1818, “Samuel Simpleton,” the editor of *The Idiot, or, Invisible Rambler*, mixed the vinegar of disappointment with his ink in the issues for September 12, and 26, 1818. In the issue of the 12th, Simpleton ran, under the name of “Fudge,” a dialogue on the subject of perception that he titled “The Kaleidoscope, or, a ‘HORSE MACKEREL’ transformed into a ‘Terrible SEA SERPENT!’ from 150 to 300 feet in length!” Writing in a stereotypical German-Jewish dialect, a showman invites a group of gentlemen to look into the kaleidoscope he is holding. One of them looks, and does see the Sea Serpent, and responds with the shout, “O Gods of the Sea, protect us . . . O he is surely of the SERPENT kind, and he has a head like a HORSE!” The showman challenged the other gentlemen to satisfy themselves that the first had seen the Sea Serpent by looking into the kaleidoscope. The second viewer claimed to have Gloucester in view, and saw a “MONSTER! 160 feet at least in length . . . pursuing and devouring the affrighted Herring by tons!” The showman desires nothing in payment, for the perception the kaleidoscope confers is free, but he does tell the gentlemen to “publish and swears to vat you *think* you see there!” One by one, the

⁸⁶ A.B., “Communication.,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 10 Sept. 1818

viewers see Rich's expedition, the Sea Serpent defending himself, the expedition's failure to capture the Sea Serpent and the arrival in Boston of Rich and his men with expectant crowds, in a fictionalized narrative. Through the voice of the showman, "Fudge" or "Simpleton," makes clear that the real curiosity is not the Sea Serpent, but perception as acted upon by interest, for the showman tells us that should you, the reader, go to the exhibition and examine Rich's catch, "you will acknowledge mine KALEIDOSCOPE a much greater *curiosity* in transforming and magnifying a 'HORSE MACKEREL' into a 'Monstrous SEA SERPENT!'"⁸⁷

The dialogue of "Fudge" was just one of several articles "Simpleton" wrote about the Sea Serpent phenomenon that alternately depicted and lampooned the interest in it and the practices of non-scientific naturalist discourse in New England. As the year 1818 began, the first year of the publication, "Simpleton" wrote an announcement in March that he would post "Bullitins" about the Sea Serpent over the coming year. "The Kaleidoscope" is the most important of his articles in relation to the Sea Serpent phenomenon because it showed the boundaries of natural history practice in New England, all the while showing skepticism in the Sea Serpent. "Simpleton" highlighted, certain aspects of European natural history practice that, Lewis argues, were disparaged in the Early Republic as detrimental to perception and fact creation, and these were systematization and theory.

Vill you just take a Kaleidoscope peep;
At the great 'Leviathan' of the deep!

⁸⁷ "Fudge," "The Kaleidoscope," *The Idiot, or, Invisible Rambler*, 12 Sept. 1818

And tell us vat you see there?

The intellectual tendency to systematize knowledge is as old as Aristotle, but Americans in the Early Republic associated this type of thinking not with their new natural history, but with that of Europe, which they viewed as inappropriate for their culture and productive of inaccurate results on the subject of American nature. The most powerful example, and the one most often attacked by American scientific and non-scientific naturalists, was Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon's degeneracy thesis, which he summed up thusly, that "in America, therefore, animated Nature is weaker, less active, and more circumscribed in the variety of her productions; for we perceive, from the enumeration of the American animals, that the number of species is not only fewer, but that . . . all the animals are smaller than those of the Old Continent." In assessing European evaluations of the content of nature in North America, citizens of the Early Republic "accused European closet philosophers of system building, or drawing definitive conclusions prematurely from insufficient facts."⁸⁸

The character of the showman, with his thick accent, is a reminder of Europe, and the "kaleidoscope" he carries is designed to take one actual view and mirror it several times in a systematic, circular fashion, thus creating a distorted picture, and adding too many reflections to one real event, the tumbling of tinted glass chips. While one may interpret the "kaleidoscope" as lampooning the

⁸⁸ Andrew J. Lewis, "A Democracy of Facts, An Empire of Reason," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 669

tendency in the practice of American naturalists “to value multiple testimony over human reasoning,” one view with many reflections does not many sighting events, each with its own different set of circumstances, make. The showman’s kaleidoscope resembles the “good glass,” “mast head spy glass,” and telescope used by other Sea Serpent observers, but is actually a representation of the American perception that “Europeans . . . relied on untrustworthy sources and forced their findings into systems,” as “American naturalists imagined themselves stripping away philosophy from nature and basing their practice on collected facts.”⁸⁹

When the showman tells the gentlemen to look into the kaleidoscope and then write and publish what they think they see, one may consider it, in light of Andrew Lewis’s argument, a definition of the line between theory and fact in the natural history of the Early Republic. In inviting the men to write and publish *what they think they see*, the showman is advocating theory as Lewis has constructed it because, in American “antitheoretical and antisystematic” natural history practice, “if testimonies and observations seemed to establish the plausibility of a claim, yet left considerable room for reasonable doubt,” as did the Sea Serpent phenomenon, “then it was better to avoid making definitive assertions.” The process of reason that led to theory was not the same as “reason manifested through the works of

⁸⁹ Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte DeBuffon, “Dissertation On Animals Peculiar to the New World,” or, “Of Animals Particular to the New World,” *Buffon’s Natural History: General And Particular*, Vol. 5, (Trans. William Smellier, 1781), 112-123; <http://faculty.nicu.edu/fmoran/vol5new.htm> 11-2013; Andrew J. Lewis, “A Democracy of Facts, An Empire of Reason,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 669, 677, 689; “Fudge,” “The Kaleidoscope,” *The Idiot, or, Invisible Rambler*, 12 Sept. 1818

nature,” and so by way of first-hand observation, “open to all,” Americans aspired to overthrow the limitations of European thought.⁹⁰

Of all the responses to Rich’s expedition and exhibition, “Simpleton” was the most hysterically skeptical, it was as if the events of September 1818 had negated entirely the events of a year before and those recorded occasionally even before then. In his article titled “Hoaxing,” published on Sept. 26, 1818, “Simpleton” attacked Richard Rich directly, in defining hoaxing as a term “first coined by a fool,” that “implies a probable lie told by a fool,” for the purpose of imposing upon “those, whom that fool thinks wiser and honester than himself.” After his attack on Rich, which went on for several paragraphs, “Simpleton” wrote that most of the news editors who ran the more numerous, credible reports, were fools for publishing “so many ridiculous, improbable and wonderful tales, without any examination, into their truth . . .” and he concluded that Sea Serpent reporting was not in the long-term interest of news organizations, and that they turned newspapers into “*lying chronicles*” and eventually, he prophesied, few of the “well informed part of Society” would buy them. One can sense that “Simpleton” is constitutionally mistrustful of democratic impulses, and so he reacted to the broadening of content in newspapers generally, and especially to the non-scientific practice of natural history, and the democratic discourse of fact that is prevalent in the Sea Serpent phenomenon.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Andrew J. Lewis, “A Democracy of Facts, An Empire of Reason,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 678

⁹¹ “Samuel Simpleton,” “Hoaxing,” *Idiot, or, Invisible Rambler*, 26 Sept. 1818

Other writers took the questions raised by Rich's fiasco more seriously. In an article first carried in the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, and reprinted several times, most notably in the *Portsmouth Oracle* and *Salem Gazette*, Nathan Hale showed yet more reflection on the phenomenon in its first year, beginning with Rich, and why the public and other writers should treat him gently. "Capt. Rich, with a very laudable spirit undertook the arduous, and apparently hazardous enterprize, of drawing the monster from his hiding place, and of solving, if possible, an important problem in natural history." Because Rich had done more than anyone else to try to verify, through the medium of fact, the existence of the Sea Serpent, "his doubts . . . are not to be classed with the stupid incredulity of those who have not deigned to examine the evidence . . ." And yet it is precisely Rich's statements, first, that he had caught the Sea Serpent, and second, that the Sea Serpent was "by his peculiar movement" presenting a deception, in these he overstepped the boundaries of American natural history practice in the democracy of facts because "American naturalists," in their efforts "to discover and discern underlying structures and processes of nature were hesitant to make definitive statements" because in so doing, they would "replicate the generalizing tendencies of European science."⁹²

Still, by mid-September, Hale decided that he could not ignore the "mass of evidence" published in the previous year, in which "the appearances described by

⁹² "From the Boston Daily Advertiser, The Sea Serpent," *Salem Gazette*, 15 Sept. 1818; the article includes a compilation of reports from some of the deponents to the Linnaean Society of New England Committee's *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England Concerning a Large Marine Animal . . .*, 1817, Amos Story, Solomon Allen 3d, William Foster, Lonson Nash, Matthew Gaffney
Andrew J. Lewis, "A Democracy of Facts, An Empire of Reason," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 671

most of the observers who have given their testimony under oath differ materially from those by which Capt Rich was deluded.” Interviews with several of the 1817 deponents in Gloucester in September 1818 “and several of those whose statements are published in the collection of the Linnaean Society, are still confident that they could not have been mistaken.” If all such testimony is untrustworthy, then, Hale asked, “we should be glad to know on what grounds human testimony is to be credited.” Hale’s conclusion was that Rich took an animal he believed to be the Sea Serpent, but that animal was not the Sea Serpent “described by the above deponents, we entreat our readers to judge for themselves.” Approximately two months later, Hale printed a short, tersely-worded paragraph that began with this sentence, “Our good neighbors of Gloucester will not suffer themselves to be ridiculed.”⁹³

Even after 1818, news editors continued to act as naturalists in their evaluation of sources, narratives and claims, and two of the strongest examples of their work were a series of two articles on the Sea Serpent in the *Boston Intelligencer* and a month-long “History of the Sea Serpent” in the *Essex Register* in 1820.⁹⁴

Like the article run by the *Boston Gazette* on Oct. 22, 1818, which reprinted the accounts with updates of the Sargent deponents, and the reprinting of some of

⁹³ “From the Boston Daily Advertiser, The Sea Serpent,” *Salem Gazette*, 15 Sept. 1818; “Salem, Nov. 14, 1818,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 17 Nov. 1818

⁹⁴ “Original Miscellany. The Great Sea Serpent,” *Boston Intelligencer*, 19 Aug. 1820; “Miscellany. Evidence Respecting the Sea Serpent (continued),” *Boston Intelligencer*, 16 Sept. 1820; “History of the Sea-Serpent, continued,” *Essex Register*, 6 Sept. 1820

the Linnaean Society deponents in the *Salem Gazette* on Sept. 19, 1818, the two articles in the *Boston Intelligencer*, one run in mid-August, 1820 and the next in September, 1820, were designed to review some of the evidence with the public. The Sea Serpent prompted this kind of communication not just because it was a natural history pursuit carried out in and by the public, but also because it had generated, by this time, much poetic, fictional and even futuristic literature.

The first article in the *Boston Intelligencer* begins with a discussion of the Sea Serpent, nature, wonder, history and why some people in the community stubbornly cling to an incredulous attitude on the creature. The “body of testimony establishing the existence of what Bishop PONTOPIDDAN denominates, the *Serpens Marinus Magnus*, which . . . especially since the year 1817, has been given to the world, ought to have put an end to controversy.” Again we see the Sea Serpent conforming to type, but unlike Rich’s assertion of its conformation, the reprinted reports that follow give us the composition of that type. One would think that as an advocate for the Sea Serpent, the author would include only accounts that validate the 1817 Sea Serpent, but includes historical accounts of sea serpents containing features that differ from the 1817 experiences.

For instance, the author, argues that exaggeration is not necessarily deception, provided there is no conscious intent to mislead. He reproduces one account from Bergen, Norway, published in William Guthrie and John Knox’s *A New Geographical, Historical and Commercial Grammar, 1815*, which stated that the

animal was 600 feet long, the author makes clear that the length of the Sea Serpent could not be clearly stated because of “the fallacy of determining by the eye, the dimensions of objects at sea; a monstrous animal might yet have been seen, though his bulk should have been exaggerated.” While Guthrie and Knox were skeptical about the Bergen Sea Serpent account they printed, they had no trouble believing the Roman historian Livy, when he described a huge land serpent in Africa “which disputed the passage of the army of Regulus over the river Bagrada . . .”⁹⁵ The author of the article, not Livy, gives with no attribution the African serpent’s length, 120 feet, “double the length of any land serpent known,” and so the account should have “awakened suspicions as to the veracity of the rest of the narration.” The author believes that neither account should be discredited completely, asserting that there was “probably an exaggerated statement in both.” In the discussion of the relationship between historical and contemporary accounts, the author of the article, presumably the editor of the *Boston Intelligencer*, shows a democratic feature of the practice of American natural history in his use of persuasiveness. No scientific writer or reporter of a first-hand account would use rhetoric of persuasion in a report or list of facts. The Sea Serpent phenomenon as an aspect of natural

⁹⁵ Livy, *Periochae*, Book 18, Sect. 255, “In Africa, [Marcus] Atilius Regulus killed a serpent of portentous dimensions, and suffered great losses among his soldiers. But although he had fought successfully against the Carthaginians in several battles, the Senate did not send him a successor. He complained in a letter to the Senate, in which he compared his request to a piece of land that had been left by its workers. 2In the person of Regulus, Fortuna wanted to give an example of both sides of fate: he was defeated and captured by Xanthippus, a Spartan leader that had been invited by the Carthaginians to support them. 3After this, the Roman commanders pursued the war successfully on land and sea, although the effects were spoiled by shipwreck of the fleet.” <http://www.livius.org/li-liv/periocae/periocae016.html> “Livy: Periochae 16-20,” *Livius Dot Org*, 11-2013; The account is preserved in the “Periochae,” a 4th century summary of an abridged version of the complete *History of Rome*.

history demonstrates how the public content of natural history, the quality of evidence, and the importance of the questions involved came to be a matter of editorial reflection. And editors were, by 1820, conscious that they had this kind of public intellectual power.⁹⁶

The “History of the Sea-Serpent,” written presumably by Warwick Palfray of the *Essex Register* in Salem, is another addition from American natural history to the democracy of facts, in that it attempts to persuade people to disbelieve Sea Serpent accounts. In his first article, he reprinted the accounts of Shubael West and Samuel Schmid, both of whom claimed to have seen the Sea Serpent fighting with a whale in late June, 1818. He also reprinted Joseph Woodward’s account of the Sea Serpent from May, 1818. All of these accounts are hoaxes, and like that of Richard Rich, are in their details completely incongruous with Sargent’s and the Linnaean society deponents. Such stories were tailored to produce laughter or skepticism, and to break up the fabric of self-referentiality that had been characteristic of the body of Sea Serpent accounts in 1817. The *Essex Register* characterized the Woodward, West and Schmid accounts inaccurately as “some of the evidence by which the belief of a Sea Serpent has been maintained,” as if the fact-gathering discourse had been, in the spring and summer of 1818, completely permissive. Given the observations of Nathan Hale in Boston about the discrepancy among accounts of 1817-18, just two years earlier to the very month, this statement is itself misleading, anything did not go into the “mass of evidence.”

⁹⁶ “Original Miscellany. The Great Sea Serpent,” *Boston Intelligencer*, 19 Aug. 1820

The remainder of the article calls into question the accounts of the Linnaean Society deponents, claiming that the Linnaean Society of New England put together its committee and report on flimsy evidence, “having learned from vague report, that an animal of very singular appearance had been recently seen in the harbour of Gloucester . . .” The idea of a Sea Serpent, according to this author, arose from a “disposition to indulge the imagination at the expense of truth,” and he tries to prove it by discrediting the Linnaean Society’s agent, the man who took the testimonies, Gloucester’s Justice of the Peace, Lonson Nash, and by searching for inconsistencies in the testimonies themselves.

One of the Linnaean Society deponents, Solomon Allen 3d, testified that the Sea Serpent’s motion was not undulatory, that is, a vertical slither in which several humps would appear just above the surface of water, but horizontal, as is the movement of snakes on land. “I am confident,” wrote Nash to the Committee on August 28, 1817, “that Mr. Allen is mistaken, as to the motion of the animal. His motion is vertical.” Nash and Allen also disagreed on the number of protuberances, where Allen saw about fifty, Nash saw eight, and did not dismiss the prospect that there might be more. “And what is his reason for disbelieving that Mr. Allen saw *fifty* distinct portions at one time? Why forsooth, because he saw only *eight* distinct portions at one time” though “more may have been visible.” The editor came to his point, that where he saw permissiveness in the acceptance of the narratives of West, Schmid and Woodward, he criticizes the lack of permissiveness as in Nash’s circumscriptions. “If we allow ourselves to reject evidence at our own

will and pleasure, there can be nothing but the reveries of our own imaginations as a result of this liberty.”⁹⁷

Where Warwick Palfray accuses Lonson Nash of blithely entering the realm of license, Nash’s own dismissal and correction of Allen’s description was probably prompted by the content and meta-picture of the other accounts. When Nash was given the assignment of collecting information for the Linnaean Society Committee, Judge John Davis, Jacob Bigelow and Francis C. Gray, he was also given a formula of questions to ask each deponent, but he did not follow this formula consistently. Question 12 had to do with the number of protuberances, and the Committee worded it this way, “How many distinct portions were out of water at one time?” In eight of the eleven of the depositions, this number is absent, because, in the case of two, the given deponent tells the interrogator that he did not count them, or, in the case of six, a number is not mentioned. In Nash’s own account and criticism, he writes about the issue of visibility, and an inability to see just how many protuberances there were at any given time may explain the eight accounts in which this feature is not enumerated.

Furthermore, Palfray continued his essays over the course of September, 1820, and the one he published on the 20th of that month was devoted to the sighting accounts of the minister Cheever Felch, Marshal James Prince and the merchant Samuel Cabot. The article tells us that Felch “speaks of the room” the Sea

⁹⁷ “History of the Sea-Serpent,” *Essex Register*, 6 Sept. 1820

Serpent took up in turning, as well as Marshal Prince, and both their witnesses may throw considerable light on the Gloucester witnesses (Sargent's deponents), who describe his *staple like* appearance on the water." Felch's exact words were these, "in turning, he was rather slow, and made a considerable wake." The clearest description of the staple formation is that of Joseph Moores, who stated that he saw the head move to the tail on the surface of the water, and then he saw "one part of him move one way and the other part in a contrary direction, preserving a continuity of the parts from one end to the other . . ." without any wake or disturbance of the water. I would argue that the two types of movement, the turns observed by Felch and Prince, are distinct from the staple formation observed by so many others. What is clear is that the accounts of the "Gloucester witnesses," or Charles Lenox Sargent's deponents are being judged against those of Cheever Felch and James Prince, based on two different types of Sea Serpent movement instead of one.⁹⁸

Of James Prince's account, Palfray tells us that he saw the Sea Serpent at the same time and from the same point of view as Samuel Cabot, in spite of this, both men were not standing together in mid-August, 1819. Palfray stated that since both of their accounts were so alike, and both were so like those of the "Gloucester witnesses" he just tried to discredit, "a comparison is unnecessary." My suspicion is that he did not want to challenge the credibility of either Prince or Cabot, both of

⁹⁸ "History of the Sea-Serpent," *Essex Register*, 20 Sept. 1820;
 "The Sea-Serpent," *Boston Intelligencer*, 11 Sept. 1819;
 "Testimony of Joseph Moores," *Boston Gazette*, 22 Oct. 1818

whom had social standing, political and economic power in the region. In treating the subject of James Prince, Palfray is gently respectful in tone. As has been seen before, Prince was conscious of his limitations as an observer, and disclosed them in his account. Palfray wrote that “the Marshal “has *expressed great doubts*” because, in particular, he was unable to “distinguish between the fish and his wake and refers the whole to the judgment of others.” Palfray considers this to be the only respectable course of action for any Sea Serpent observer, and if only “the original witnesses had been so candid, and so cautious we believe the story could never have gained credit with the public.” Indeed, it was for want of such caution “in the Linnaean Society, that the story passed forth to the world stamped with authority, which was, unfortunately for them, put upon base metal.”⁹⁹

Clearly, one of Palfray’s objectives was to discredit the Sea Serpent observers and the evidence they had produced so completely that subsequent observations and reports would be treated with the most intense contempt it was possible for the public to express short of tar and feathers. His case is strikingly similar to the present-day skeptic’s case against God, and though his objective not quite the same, the banishment of the Sea Serpent from public discourse and the culture generally. He declared that “the whole story is inconsistent and absurd . . . the evidence is made up of shreds and patches.” He argues further that if the community, editorial and readers alike, was to call it, whatever it is, an albacore, tunny, horse mackerel, seal or shark, “we shall at least get clear of all the

⁹⁹ “History of the Sea-Serpent,” *Essex Register*, 20 Sept. 1820

absurdities” while garnering “the satisfaction to know that, for three years in succession, some such animal has been taken where the sea serpent had been playing his pranks . . .” Palfray began his last article with a warning, “If we cannot solve the phenomena that have been resolved into a sea serpent, . . . the believers in such an animal have no reason to persist in their belief.” Where the Sea Serpent played his pranks, Palfray desired an ocean without imaginary embellishment, where “The Sea Serpent” tops a column of text, Palfray demands a page with a mundane, not just plausible story. He was disappointed, because even his own *Essex Register*, the one newspaper that printed more Sea Serpent articles than any other in the region, was to print yet many more accounts and other more literary Sea Serpent materials in the years afterward.¹⁰⁰

News editors and writers of Sea Serpent accounts were conscious that their subject, by way of its fantastic associations, was incongruous with most news. But, also, because they were influenced by the climate of “philosophical modesty” that prevented use of theoretical and systematic thinking and the enunciation of definitive statements about nature, that Andrew Lewis found to be peculiar to American natural history at the time, their writing often employs self-consciousness. The “caution” that Warwick Palfray noticed in James Prince’s letter of August, 1819, is so powerful a characteristic of the writing that it seems that the writer does not trust his own senses, or even his capacity to communicate his experience forthrightly. and is, therefore, asking the reader to validate his

¹⁰⁰ “History of the Sea Serpent,” *Essex Register*, 27 Sept. 1820

experience. “I presume I may have seen what is generally thought to be the Sea Serpent, I have ventured on this description being also induced to hope, that if anything of the marvelous is stated as coming from me you will correct it.”¹⁰¹ Even in 1817, the caution or “philosophical modesty” observed by Lewis was evident in the open letter of William Lee, a former accountant at the State Department, to Samuel L. Mitchill, a founder of the New York Lyceum of Natural History. Lee’s letter was a narrative about his own Sea Serpent experience forty miles off Cape Breton Island in 1787, and circulated in several newspapers in coastal New England and New York in September 1817. He had maintained a long silence about the incident because “At Halifax, and on my return to Boston, I was laughed at so immoderately that I found it necessary to remain silent on the subject, to escape the imputation of using a traveller’s privilege of dealing in the marvelous.” Both letters are sent to scientists, and show how authorial and editorial intent in sea serpent reporting was completely subordinate to the aims of natural history, whether it was practiced by scientists or non-scientists.¹⁰²

Editors and readers engaged themselves in a process of contextualization in order to authenticate the reports, and so the reports were viewed as true only to the extent that they corresponded “in all essential particulars with the former accounts of his appearance.”¹⁰³ It is for this reason that I have concluded that as literature, the reports and the dialogue of credulity and incredulity that took place

¹⁰¹ *New-York Daily Advertiser*, 23 Aug. 1819

¹⁰² “Sea Serpents,” *Niles’ Weekly Register*, 13 316 (Sept. 20, 1817), 50

¹⁰³ *Boston Recorder*, Domestic. 21 Aug. 1824

in them resemble the northern European critiques of the narratives of exploration and travel in the Americas in the fifteenth and sixteenth-century as described by Jorge Canizares-Esguerra. Though most of the observers of the Sea Serpent were not travelers or explorers, their situation was similar in that they were encountering a situation with which they were completely unfamiliar and trying to communicate it on the page. The travel account, like the Sea Serpent report, “called attention to curiosities and extraordinary phenomena.”¹⁰⁴ Canizares-Esguerra describes two processes of assessing the authenticity of the mostly Spanish literature of the exploration of the Americas between the sixteenth and through the eighteenth-century. He describes the processes of “the Renaissance art of reading,”¹⁰⁵ which employed external criticism, and another reading strategy arrived at in Northern Europe in the seventeenth-century involving internal consistency across accounts. Both types of reading are evident in the language of the Sea Serpent reports.

External criticism, the first of these, privileged the source more than the content of the writing, “audiences and editors” assessed the “character and social standing of the witnesses as paramount when doubts about the reliability of an account surfaced.” In other words, the reliability of an account was directly dependent on the character of the source individual.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford U P, 2001), 23

¹⁰⁵ Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World*, 23

¹⁰⁶ Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World*, 20

James Prince's letter was originally written to the Hon. John Davis, the chair of the Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England, so his report is a "copy of a letter from James Prince, Marshal of this District, to the Hon. Judge Davis, dated Nahant, August 16, 1819." So Prince is authenticating his account not just by disclosing his own political position, but by disclosing the recipient of his letter.¹⁰⁷

In 1818, the *Boston Recorder* ran a story about the Sea Serpent fighting with a whale based on a deposition from a merchant-mariner running a packet between Boston and Hallowell, Capt. Shubael West. Above the report itself, the editor qualified it by pointing out that West was deposed before a "Justice Mann" at Hallowell, Massachusetts, later Maine; of West himself, the *Recorder* assured its readers that "Capt West, is declared in the *Hallowell Advocate*,¹⁰⁸ to be well-known for his correctness and veracity."¹⁰⁹ In spite of the merchant-captain West's

¹⁰⁷ *Boston Gazette*, 26 Aug. 1819;
Essex Register, 21 Aug. 1819;
New-York Daily Advertiser, 23 Aug. 1819;
Hallowell Gazette, 25 Aug. 1819

¹⁰⁸ There is a predictable pattern the editors of this period had of making reference to newspapers that did not contain the name of the communities they served by inserting it into the title of the newspaper referred to. The *Boston Centinel* is the *Columbian Centinel*, the *Salem Register* is actually the *Essex Register*, and in this case, the *Hallowell Advocate* is the *American Advocate and Kennebec Advertiser*.

¹⁰⁹ *Boston Recorder*, 7 Jul. 1818;
American Advocate and Kennebec Advertiser, 27 Jun. 1818;
New England Galaxy [Boston, MA], 3 Jul. 1818;
Boston Gazette, 2 Jul. 1818;
City Gazette [Charleston, SC], 13 Jul. 1818;
Columbian Register [New Haven, CT], 4 Jul. 1818;
Idiot, or, the Invisible Rambler [Boston, MA], 4 Jul. 1818;
Essex Register [Salem, MA], 1 Jul. 1818;
New-York Columbian, 2 Jul. 1818;
New-York Daily Advertiser, 3 Jul. 1818;
Newport Mercury, 4 Jul. 1818;
Vermont Gazette [Bennington, VT], 14 Jul. 1818;
Portsmouth Oracle, 4 Jul. 1818;
Niles' Weekly Register, 11 Jul. 1818

reputation, the report of the Sea Serpent fighting with a whale seemed far-fetched enough that a second story about the incident was circulated on the affidavit of one of West's passengers, Samuel Schmid, a Swiss immigrant and resident of Philadelphia, who had, the *Boston Weekly Messenger* wrote, "good connections," had "been in the Middle and Southern states," and bore "the character of a man of strict veracity."¹¹⁰ The *Providence Gazette* assured its readers of the veracity of West by that of Schmid, but with little description of the man himself, writing, "Mr. Schmid is said to be a man of veracity, was with Capt. West when the *engagement* was seen, and his statement fully confirms that of the latter in many particulars."¹¹¹ The *Columbian Centinel* also praised Schmid as "a gentleman of talents, experience, and veracity" and pointed out that his statement, unlike that of West, had been printed in the *Hallowell Gazette*.¹¹² William Lee's letter about his own sighting experience in 1787 to Samuel Mitchill would have been considered authoritative from the perspective of external criticism because its recipient was one of the most eminent intellectual figures in the U.S. at the time, and also because the writer Lee was a former American consul at Bordeaux.¹¹³ Even where the name of the source is not stated in Sea Serpent reports, phrases like "gentlemen of information," and "gentlemen of information and veracity" are often used to characterize the

¹¹⁰ *Boston Weekly Messenger*, 9 Jul. 1818

¹¹¹ *Providence Gazette*, 18 Jul. 1818

¹¹² *Columbian Centinel* [Boston, MA], 18 Jul. 1818

¹¹³ *Columbian Register* [New Haven, CT], 20 Sept. 1817;
Ladies' Weekly Museum [New York City], 15 Sept. 1817;
New-York Daily Advertiser, 11 Sept. 1817;
New-York Evening Post, 10 Sept. 1817;
Niles' Weekly Register, 20 Sept. 1817

observers. The editor of the *Boston Intelligencer*, having seen a report dated August 11, 1818, in Portland's *Eastern Argus*, of the Sea Serpent fighting with a whale in Penobscot Bay, ran the story and qualified the source, "Capt. Smith," in terms of his experience by writing that because Smith had "been on whaling voyages, had frequent views of the attacks of the thrasher upon the whale, we place the fullest confidence in the above statement."¹¹⁴

But, as we have seen, the use of internal criticism was even more prevalent in the process of authenticating the Sea Serpent, creating the composite picture of the animal, and the context, a web of expectations based on knowledge, for his behavior. Internal criticism refers to a process that, as applied to a single narrative, seeks coherency.¹¹⁵ The critique can be extended to several reports such that the reader compares and contrasts elements, noting consistencies and inconsistencies in the texts, and thus finding which observations are creditable. Just as philosophical observers compiled and synthesized travel narratives in the late seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth-century, editors in early nineteenth-century New England frequently published compilations of Sea Serpent reports.¹¹⁶

The issue of consistency among reports over time and space, an aspect of internal criticism, was also frequently discussed in the report and comment articles on the Sea Serpent. The writer of the first printed Sea Serpent report in 1817, in the *Essex Register* concluded that the observations in the letters he had read from

¹¹⁴ *Boston Intelligencer*, 15 Aug. 1818

¹¹⁵ Canizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World*, 22

¹¹⁶ Canizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World*, 22-26

Gloucester were authoritative, based on the consistency of elements in the reports, and so he wrote “we plainly see an agreement in these different accounts, and are led to believe that the fish seen at such a distance of time and place, may have been of the same kind.”¹¹⁷

The first years of the Sea Serpent phenomenon demonstrate the functioning of a non-scientific natural history discourse and the democracy of facts in New England. Lewis describes this functioning in terms of competition, “Facts would be collected and then pitted against one another in public forums such as newspapers and magazines.” In 1817, the relationship among facts was not competitive, only in rare cases do incongruous statements make it into the printed evidence of the Sea Serpent. In 1818, the experience and statement of Richard Rich created a kind of rivalry between his claims and the evidence previously gathered. Similarly, among the Linnaean Society deponents, Solomon Allen 3d’s claim was incongruous enough to be dismissed by the Linnaean Society’s compiler in 1817. Lewis tells us that “this competition between facts-what one naturalist called the ‘democracy of facts’- would result in probable truth overwhelming and canceling out falsehood.” It is fair to say that the editors of the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, *Essex Register* and *Portsmouth Oracle* cancelled out Richard Rich’s truth in favor of the previous and more veracious understanding of the Sea Serpent arrived at in 1817. Though Lewis calls the method of the democracy of facts “permissive,” this chapter has shown

¹¹⁷ *Essex Register* [Salem, MA], Aug. 16, 1817

that it did have limits, which became more clearly defined as evidence and expectations accumulated concerning the Sea Serpent.

Unlike the scientific inquiry into the Sea Serpent, public interest in and writing about the experience of seeing the animal remained a feature, sometimes prominent, of printed material in the Early Republic. The public inquiry, whether it produced a conclusive answer or not, could be sustained and productive because the Sea Serpent had, by 1818, broadened outward as an aspect of culture from a subject of natural history to a part of the artistic, literary and dramatic culture of the era. Before this work looks at the cultural answers to the question of the Sea Serpent's existence, the next chapter will unfold the narrative of the shutting down of the scientific Sea Serpent inquiry as an aspect of the development of new structures of epistemology and authority in the early nineteenth-century American academy.

CHAPTER 2

ANATOMIZING THE SEA SERPENT

The appearance of a sea serpent off the coasts of New England and New York between August and November, 1817 prompted widespread interest in the United States and Great Britain. John Travis, a resident of Concord, North Carolina, wrote a letter on behalf of himself and his neighbors to Samuel L. Mitchill, a professor in New York City, master of several sciences, and Republican politician. On Sept. 11, 1818, The *Raleigh Register* printed Mitchill's reply to Travis, dated Aug. 13, which listed some of the important scientific documents published in the year before, calling them "worthy to be examined by yourself and friends . . ." Mitchill's list was composed of David Humphreys' collection of letters to the Royal Society, the *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England*, "by judge Davis and his learned associates[,] and Constantine S. Rafinesque's "Dissertation on Water Snakes, Sea Snakes, and Sea Serpents," published in the *American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review*. Mitchill also pointed out that the sea serpent seemed to have several "existences" indicated by the multitude of the creature's names, "Hydrus, Chersydra, Pelamis, Hydrophis," and "several other titles," but despite the confusion, Mitchill was willing to settle on *Scoliophis Atlanticus*, the name given by the Linnaean Society of New England, until a specimen was secured

and an examination done to ascertain the creature's "true zoological character and nomenclature . . ." ¹¹⁸

Like the coastal communities of New England, naturalists in the transatlantic scientific community, as it existed between 1800 and 1850, made a brief but abortive inquiry into the shape, dimensions, and character of the sea serpent in 1817. As the nineteenth-century drew near its midpoint, a second generation of British scientists in the emerging disciplines of zoology, paleontology and geology wanted the same things from the sea serpent that they had wanted from their observations of other species —to define its place both in the taxonomic scheme, and then extended their inquiries to the place the animal would hold in the emerging, developmental models of the history of life on earth. In the case of these inquiries, the Sea Serpent was found a sight and subject more fruitful to non-scientific discourses than to natural history.

This chapter discusses American and transatlantic scientific inquiries into the Sea Serpent, first in Britain in 1808, then in New England in 1817, and then will only briefly touch upon a mid-nineteenth-century British inquiry sparked by a sea serpent sighting by the crew of the Royal Navy frigate *H.M.S. Daedalus* in 1848. It will begin with a discussion of the objectives and practice of natural history, generally and among scientists in the Early Republic. Moving to the Sea Serpent, the chapter will discuss the quality of evidence and the employment of systematic reasoning along with the persistence of theory in American scientific thought in

¹¹⁸ Samuel L. Mitchill. Letter to John Travis, Aug. 13, 1818, in the *Raleigh Register*, 3 Oct. 1818

spite of the operation of the discourse of fact observed by Andrew Lewis in *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, 2011. The conflicted relationship in American scientific thought, in which scientists recognized the need for systematic thinking in the Sea Serpent inquiry but also recognized the privileging of fact in American natural history and its interface with public discourse, will be shown in a discussion and textual analysis of the Linnaean Society of New England's *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England Relative to a Large Marine Animal . . .*, 1817. The problem of descriptive and concrete evidence was central in the conclusions of the *Report*, and the long search for concrete evidence of sea serpents will show us an early analogue of the Sea Serpent phenomenon that was played out in the British Isles in 1808-1809. It will also show how, by way of the arguments and implications of Samuel L. Mitchill, David Humphreys, Constantine S. Rafinesque and William D. Peck, certain scientists actually reasoned based on descriptive evidence that the Sea Serpent was more realistically apprehended as an aspect of culture than a scientific curiosity. Their conclusions are stated but not discussed in present-day secondary sources about Victorian English natural history by Sherrie Lyons and Harriet Ritvo. Finally, the chapter will show that the scientific inquiry of the Sea Serpent was sidelined and eventually dropped in the U.S. before the middle of the nineteenth-century as scientists here, as well as in Britain, shifted their attention to inquiries that had generated concrete evidence, a move related to and simultaneous with the adoption of Uniformitarianism over the more Biblical, Catastrophist views of geological and

biological development of the earth, and simultaneous in turn with the development of the component disciplines of natural history and the professionalization of scientific work. By 1850, scientists on both sides of the Atlantic concluded that the creature was no non-descript, but a perceptual trick caused by animals already known and catalogued.

After 1848, the Sea Serpent came fully into its own as an object of culture with the publication of Eugene Batchelder's *Romance of the Sea Serpent, or, the Ichthyosaurus*, 1849. The scientific inquiry was continued in works that blended both scientific and non-scientific discourses. *The Romance of Natural History*, by Philip Henry Gosse, 1860, 1871 and *Sea Monsters Unmasked*, by Henry Lee, 1883 are two good examples of these. An exclusively scientific approach to the question of the Sea Serpent was not made again in print until the publication of *The Great Sea-Serpent: An Historical and Critical Treatise*, 1892, a catalogue of sightings by a professional Dutch zoologist, Antoon or Anthonie C. Oudemans, who, like other scientific naturalists before him, concluded that the creatures called sea serpents had already been catalogued, and were either pinnipeds, that is, related to seals or walruses, or descendants of the basilosaurus, a large cetacean that lived in the Eocene Epoch, 56-33.9 million years ago.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Philip Henry Gosse, *The Romance of Natural History*, Vol. II, 4th Edition, (London: Nisbet, 1871) <http://books.google.ca/books?id=sJgAAAAAYAAJ&dq=Romance%20of%20Natural%20History%2C%20Henry%20Gosse&pg=PA1#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, 11-2013; Henry Lee, *International Fisheries Exhibition, Sea Monsters Unmasked*, London 1883, (London: Clowes, 1883), <http://books.google.ca/books?id=i3cFAAAAMAAJ&dq=Sea%20monsters%20unmasked&pg=PR5-IA1#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, 11-2013;

Sherrie Lyons in *Species, Serpents, Skulls, and Spirits* has explained the reasons for the abortive nature of sea serpent inquiries in history recently: *Science at the Margins in the Victorian Age*, 2009. This chapter concurs with her arguments, and will ultimately argue that another cause for the Sea Serpent's marginalization in natural history was the awareness on the part of American scientific observers that, as a medium of culture, the Sea Serpent became identifiable and explicable in ways he could not have as a scientific curiosity. By these observations, it is reasonable to conclude that even the abortive scientific inquiries into the Sea Serpent off New England's coast contributed to the vitality of its literary existence. The subject of Lyons's 2009 monograph is not the sea serpent inquiry alone, but this inquiry as an aspect of the development of science and marginal sciences, called pseudosciences in the present, in Victorian Britain. Though in its second chapter, the book focuses here and there on the New England Sea Serpent phenomenon, the primary subject of the discussion is British geologist Charles Lyell's sea serpent inquiry. Lyell, the most important geologist in the English-speaking world in the nineteenth-century, and whose works influenced Charles Darwin, "believed in the sea monster's existence" and recognized that "it would provide dramatic evidence in favor of the most controversial aspect of his theory of life's history."¹²⁰ Lyons gave the Sea Serpent a much broader treatment

Antonie C. Oudemans, *The Great Sea Serpent: An Historical and Critical Treatise*, (Landsville, PA: Arment Press, 2000, Reprint, London: Brill, Luzack, 1892), <http://web.archive.org/web/20051221152903/http://www.herper.com/ebooks/titles/Seaserpent.html> Internet Archive Wayback Machine, 11-2013

¹²⁰ Sherrie L. Lyons, *Species, Serpents, Spirits and Skulls: Science at the Margins in the Victorian Age*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 19

in her article, "Sea Monsters: Myth or Genuine Relic of the Past," in "Myth and Natural Knowledge of the Sea," a part of *Oceanographic History: The Pacific and Beyond*, 2002, in which she stated the scientific problem for believers in the Sea Serpent in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, "if the sea serpent were to be taken seriously, no longer the product of ancient storytellers' over-active imaginations, but a real animal from the past, then it would have to be compatible with prevailing views of earth history."¹²¹

Similarly, if the earlier Sea Serpent accounts of 1817 through 1825 were to be taken seriously, a piece of concrete evidence that would shed light on the form and structure of the animal would have enabled Samuel L. Mitchill and the Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England to classify it and thus scientifically verify its existence. There was, in the early nineteenth-century, a morphology-based pattern of taxonomy into which the Sea Serpent, to be real, had to fit. For the lack of concrete evidence of his form, the creature remained outside of taxonomy and thus, scientific reality, because the character and objectives of

<http://books.google.ca/books?id=1gTS5kU0LbAC&lpg=PP1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, 11-2013

¹²¹ Sherrie L. Lyons, "Sea Monsters: Myth of Genuine Relic of the Past," *Oceanography History: The Pacific and Beyond*, Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress on the History of Oceanography, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, LaJolla, CA, July, 1993, Kenneth R. Benson, Philip F. Rehbrock, eds. (Seattle, London: Univ. of Washington Press, 2002), 61

<http://books.google.ca/books?id=kfv059OL6kQC&lpg=PP1&dq=Oceanographic%20history%20%2C%20pacific%20and%20beyond&pg=PA61#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, 11-2013;

natural history in America at that time were “largely, though not exclusively observational, classificatory, and taxonomic.”¹²²

Additionally, Lyons points out that generally in the Victorian Era, all areas of science were in a state of growth, as the “theory of electromagnetism continued the grand unification of the physical sciences,” building upon the “spectacular successes of the scientific revolution . . .” New developments in taxonomy, geology, embryology allowed Charles Darwin to draw upon “a wealth of information . . . unavailable to his predecessors . . .” There was also, though she does not call it a by-product of scientific progress, which is how Andrew Lewis described the fascination with swallow submersion in the Early Republic, an “unprecedented growth in the marginal sciences . . .” which are, in her study, the sea serpent inquiries, phrenology and spiritualism. These marginal sciences emerged in Britain because people there, and I would argue, here in the U.S. also, found themselves facing “an environment of competing theories and beliefs,” in which “specific doubts” were “raised about particular issues,” and thus “habit of doubt itself was unconsciously bred.” Doubt created an uncertain intellectual climate, with the result that “individuals no longer felt secure in their own beliefs, and this in turn fueled the growth of the marginal sciences.” The concept-competitive

¹²² Sherrie L. Lyons, “Sea Monsters: Myth of Genuine Relic of the Past,” *Oceanography History: The Pacific and Beyond*, Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress on the History of Oceanography, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, LaJolla, CA, July, 1993, Kenneth R. Benson, Philip F. Rehbrock, eds. (Seattle, London: Univ. of Washington Press, 2002), 61
<http://books.google.ca/books?id=kfv059OL6kQC&lpg=PP1&dq=Oceanographic%20history%20%2C%20pacific%20and%20beyond&pg=PA61#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, 11-2013 ;
 Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, Early American Studies, (Phila.: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 5

intellectual climate Lyons describes here is similar to the New England environment of sea serpent reporting described in the previous chapter that Andrew Lewis termed the democracy of facts with two significant differences. In the United States, the contending relationship in the culture was among facts, in Britain, scientific concepts and theories contended. In addition, Lewis does not describe some overall psychological or affective component of American natural history arising from the people themselves. If anything, the exercise of one's faculties in garnering knowledge of nature was seen as an activity that would produce useful results in a national context and for the public good. Only later on, toward the Antebellum Era, would the affective response to the natural world be addressed in the culture in the body of prescriptive literature called natural theology.¹²³

The inquiry into sea serpents was sidelined and abandoned in the Victorian academy for three reasons, the first of which was that interest in the sea serpent constituted a new boundary on the contested ground between the amateur and professional scientists, with amateurs being more interested in the creature than professionals. In historical discussions of the first three decades of nineteenth-century science, I would argue that the term "professional" denotes an inappropriate category of analysis, because, at that time, the "nearest thing to a paper qualification for a post in life sciences was a medical degree" and the "nearest thing to postgraduate training" was to be a "naturalist attached to a

¹²³ Sherrie L. Lyons, *Species, Serpents, Spirits and Skulls: Science at the Margins in the Victorian Age*, xii, 3;
 Andrew J. Lewis, *Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, 15

voyage or expedition.” Such career opportunities, though uncommon, were important and helped make the careers of Sir Joseph Banks, and that of Charles Darwin, who was engaged as a naturalist on the cruise of the *Beagle* in 1839.¹²⁴

Instead of the binary categories of professionals and amateurs, eighteenth and early nineteenth-century natural history was a field populated by various types of amateurs, and these have been described in a schema constructed by Neal C. Gillespie in 1984. Briefly, his categories are these, “researchers,” who engaged in endeavors “yielding appreciable accomplishment,” and worked in “usually but not invariably in fully scientific occupations . . . ,” “practitioners,” who were “employed in science-related occupations,” but did not publish research, and “cultivators” who applied their knowledge to unpaid scientific activity. The cultivators’ work was geared toward the enhancement of self-education, and secondarily toward “the increase of knowledge.” All of the scientist-participants in the Sea Serpent phenomenon can be categorized and their work understood, by way of Gillespie’s useful shadings of historically-specific amateurism.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Sherrie L. Lyons, *Species, Serpents, Spirits and Skulls: Science at the Margins in the Victorian Age*, 3-4;

David E. Allen, “Chapter 2, Amateurs and Professionals,” *The Modern Biological and Earth Sciences*, Peter J. Bowler, John V. Pickstone, eds., *Cambridge History of Science, Vol. 6*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2009; Cambridge Histories Online, 2013), 17, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521572019.003> 11-2013

¹²⁵ Sherrie L. Lyons, *Species, Serpents, Spirits and Skulls: Science at the Margins in the Victorian Age*, 3-4;

David E. Allen, “Chapter 2, Amateurs and Professionals,” *Cambridge History of Science, Vol. 6*, 18-19, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521572019.003> 11-2013;

Andrew J. Lewis, *Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, 7

Similarly, in the U.S., in spite of there being “no professional requirements” for the practice of scientific natural history, the pursuit was an avocation, not a career, and there were certain informal, “if rigorous, requirements to participate.” Certain “key concepts” had to be mastered, and so the aspirant one had to have a working knowledge of “important texts.” Then it was necessary for a scientist to “possess an awareness and implementation of proper observational techniques.” Finally, one had to acquire and cultivate the capacity to render such observations onto the page as “recognizable rhetoric and discourse that suggested a transparent rendering of one’s observations onto the page.” And so while most non-scientist Americans were suspicious of the “genteel trappings” and the scientific naturalists’ claims to “exclusive expertise” from 1780 to 1850, it is quite clear that in spite of the Revolution and the imperatives of American nationalism, in spite of the privileging of facts in public and scientific discourse, to master the skills listed above, the American scientific naturalist had to have “formal and informal genteel education” and along with that, a perspective guided by certain foreign intellectual products, theory and systematic thought in natural history. In their assessment of the evidence concerning the Sea Serpent, it is thus impossible to believe that the Linnaean Society of New England, and all the other scientific observers described in this chapter, would not have been influenced in their perspective by prevailing theories of the natural world.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Andrew J. Lewis, *Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, 7

Second in standing among the reasons for the abortive nature of sea serpent inquiries, Lyons argues, was the problem of defining the nature of evidence. She observed that though the “serpent literature reflected the language of the courts, drawing upon eyewitness accounts and affidavits,” such evidence, in the eyes of scientific naturalists, did not constitute proof at a time in which scientists were codifying “what counted as scientific proof.” Among them, it was informally understood that “sightings must eventually be backed up by actual specimens.” Nicolaas Rupke, a Dutch historian of science currently working at Washington and Lee University in Virginia, in his own work about Richard Owen, an eminent mid-nineteenth-century biologist and paleontologist, argued in 1994 that for Owen and the new professional scientists, the “cardinal issue” in the sea serpent inquiry was “the nature of proof in natural history.” Rupke wrote about rhetorical patterns of proof concerning sea serpents in the early nineteenth-century, arguing that people favoring the existence of the sea serpent invariably “adopted a legal procedure for determining truth,” and so the writing and evaluation of reports was drawn such that “fact” was distinguished from “fiction” not in as a museum or laboratory exercise, but in a magistrate’s court.¹²⁷

Finally, in the mid-nineteenth-century, on the account of a new “consensus view” that “emerged concerning the history of life,” the idea of an extant “relic surviving from the distant past” became increasingly “untenable” in paleontology

¹²⁷ Sherrie L. Lyons, *Species, Serpents, Spirits and Skulls: Science at the Margins in the Victorian Age*, 4; Nicolaas Rupke, *Richard Owen: Victorian Naturalist*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), 324-6

and zoology. Furthermore, Lyons argues that the story of the sea serpent in the nineteenth-century shows that the success of science is attributable to scientists' care in choosing the questions they investigate. The geologists and paleontologists of the mid-nineteenth-century, Lyons concludes, chose not to "use their time and limited financial resources" inquiring into a creature "that might not even exist when a wealth of existing fossil and stratigraphical data awaited interpretation."¹²⁸

The role of British paleontologist Richard Owen in relation to the Sea Serpent inquiries is treated in an essay by Brian Regal, 2012, and a book by Nicolaas Rupke, 1994. Owen was one of the strongest contemporary opponents of Darwin's theory of Evolution through Natural Selection, and he managed to stifle the sea serpent inquiry completely in the mid-nineteenth-century in his campaign to separate judicial discourse and epistemology from scientific practice altogether. Regal's and Rupke's works disclose much about professionalization in the mid-nineteenth-century, and do not discuss American natural history. Though Owen collected descriptive evidence as "original letters and newspaper items" for the study of the sea serpent from 1830 on, he used these sources to re-shape the authority of evidence such that it favored the concrete over the descriptive. In spite of the "Gloucester Monster seen off the coast of Massachusetts" being "established in the eyes of some naturalists" in 1818 by "legal documents rather than physical evidence," both Rupke and Regal argue Owen was determined that

¹²⁸ Sherrie L. Lyons, *Species, Serpents, Spirits and Skulls: Science at the Margins in the Victorian Age*,

“physical evidence” should be “confirmed by a museum based authority,” one standing entirely beyond the “expertise of jurisprudence.”¹²⁹

Two histories deal more closely with the problem of taxonomy, the chief preoccupation of natural history in the nineteenth-century, and the first of these, Harriet Ritvo’s *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, 1997, focuses on the theoretically-active taxonomy of natural history emergent in the nineteenth-century and the informal, older, and *unplotted* epistemologies and systems of vernacular taxonomy. Ritvo found that in Victorian Britain, “butchers, artists, farmers and showmen all employed distinctive taxonomies in their work, although they seldom bothered to articulate them theoretically.” A result of the presence of the multiplicity of classificatory strategies existing in the culture at the time, the claims of the scientific establishment in Britain were simultaneously “liable to be contradicted from without as well as undermined from within,” and so scientists “quietly incorporated vernacular categories into their classificatory schemes, especially with regard to mammals,” which were thought to be the most important of creatures because they were the most human-like. In eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain, “animals performed many different functions . . . in relation to many different groups of people,” and so “each of the ways that people imagined, discussed, and treated animals implied some taxonomic structure.” That structure, to which Britain’s scientific community was not impervious, Ritvo argues, was socially determined, “the categorization of animals reflected the rankings of people

¹²⁹ Brian Regal, “Richard Owen and the Sea Serpent,” *Endeavour*, 36 2, (June, 2012), 65-67

both figuratively and literally, as analogy and as continuation.” In other words, they anthropomorphized the animals they knew and used them to describe their society and experiences.

Of course, this work differs from that of Ritvo in that it deals with the New England region and the United States and just one creature, but it also deals with a few facets of just one sort of function, that of the Sea Serpent as a medium of culture-- literary, artistic, dramatic, historical and cultural expression. One can see some of Ritvo’s thesis at work, particularly in the publication of the *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England Relative to a Large Marine Animal* . . . along with the correspondence of David Humphreys both as books in 1817, where it can be argued that a set of genteel intellectuals were trying to create a top layer of scholarship, an epistemology that would stand apart from the Sea Serpent reporting and non-scientific commentary done in the newspapers and read on the street.

In the act of classifying the New England Sea Serpent, there were no socially or vocationally determined schemes of taxonomy at work because the sightings of the creature in history were so rare. There was only the seaside, sighting, object, movement, impression, that, for example, it was a reptile or smooth and leechlike— the experience was framed in the same rhetoric and more or less the same nomenclature whether the observer was a clergyman, mariner, merchant, supercargo, seaside resident or incidental onlooker from town. Whereas, in Britain,

the artist, hunter, fisherman, butcher and exhibiter of freaks all had their own taxonomic understanding. No such double-fabric of classification is perceptible in the New England Sea Serpent phenomenon. Coastal New Englanders, from the journalistic, literary, and descriptive evidence, referred to their experiences in a historical rather than vernacular or scientific taxonomic context, and this was as close to an implied taxonomic scheme for the Sea Serpent as they could manage come.

D. Graham Burnett, in *Trying Leviathan: The Nineteenth-Century Court Case That Put the Whale on Trial and Challenged the Order of Nature*, 2007, took Ritvo's thesis about the relationship between society, vernacular and scientific taxonomy to a specific case, *Maurice V. Judd*, in New York City in 1818. From a scientific standpoint, the case concerned itself with just one question, whether or not the whale was a fish. The case, in which Samuel L. Mitchill testified that the whale was a mammal, was decided against the scientific contention, and upheld the more widespread, Biblically based, and prosaic understanding at the time, that the whale was a fish. The trial became a "pageant of natural historical erudition . . . for settling natural and social order," and did "represent a remarkable instance of science at the bar in the nineteenth-century." Most broadly construed, its outcome demonstrates the separation between scientific and non-scientific natural history discourses in the U.S. The separation is shown in the sources of the Sea Serpent phenomenon, and the categories seem to be mutually exclusive. Unlike the case of

the whale, there was never any event in which the Sea Serpent's classification by either scientists or non-scientists was contested.¹³⁰

In the New England Sea Serpent phenomenon, the only statement about the creature's taxonomic classification is the often-repeated assertion in reports and comments, that the creature is a serpent. It is called a "Sea Serpent," or a "Great Sea Serpent," sometimes a "Leviathan," and at others, a "monster" or "monster of the deep." Even where it presented a smooth, non-scaly appearance, it was still called a sea serpent. The learned observer David Humphreys called it the "Serpent of the Ocean," and scientists John Davis, Jacob Bigelow, and Francis C. Gray designated it *Scoliophis Atlanticus*, the Atlantic humped snake. While the more scientific *Scoliophis* might represent a scientific, upper crust and above-the-street appellation for the Sea Serpent, it was never discussed in a binary against any of the other names for the same creature, nor did it ever suggest that the Sea Serpent was anything beyond the reports.

Among all these names, there may have been confusion, but there was no social component or conflict. None could arise because, unlike the case of the whale, the Sea Serpent had only an appearance, and no anatomy. The decades after 1817 passed, and nothing in New England's scientific record of the creature changed from year to year. The Sea Serpent was still seen, always occasional, always the same in form and movement, and always elusive. Instead of time and

¹³⁰ D. Graham Burnett, *Trying Leviathan: The Nineteenth-Century Court Case that Put the Whale on Trial and Challenged the Order of Nature*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 2007), 4

experience whittling away the confusion into one experience, one classification, one space in taxonomy, and then one relationship in phylogeny, the accounts multiplied, the names stayed more or less the same, but there remained many of them, as the Sea Serpent became both medium and expression.

In the assertions of Samuel L. Mitchill and the implications of others, it is clear that the scientific community in New England and New York in particular, did what American non-scientists were discouraging, they were theorizing, and their approach was centered not on the creature, but on the minds and motives of writers and observers. This chapter will show that scientists in the Early Republic, early on, did not credit the evidence of non-scientists on its face, yet they understood that the Sea Serpent of the New England accounts would contribute to the humane, literary and artistic discourses lying beyond natural history, indicating that the creature belonged not to the sea, but to the culture.¹³¹

To begin, let us discuss the purposes of natural history and the vicissitudes of American society and culture generally in the Early Republic, 1789-1830. The chief preoccupation of natural history over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century was finding materials for the “systematic study of natural objects.” The theoretical corollaries of these activities were the construction of the taxonomic relationships among living things and the construction of the geological scale of time by way of the study of fossils. The work of naturalists, learned and lay,

¹³¹ Sherrie L. Lyons, *Species, Serpents, Spirits and Skulls: Science at the Margins in the Victorian Age*, xii, 1-4

consisted of encountering objects and phenomena, and then “naming, describing, classifying, and searching for their overall order.” Most of the scientific naturalists, the people Gillespie would call “researchers” generally did not go out into the field for their specimens, but depended on collections made by others. The works of Georges Louis Lecher, Comte de Buffon and Carolus Linnaeus in the eighteenth-century were reflective of the “extensive empirical base of knowledge available in private and public collections of the latter half of the eighteenth-century.” In the nineteenth-century, because of imperial expansion and exploratory voyages and the collecting of “colonial officials, traveling naturalists, and commercial natural history houses,” the content and quality of natural history collections expanded such that they, as well as natural history, were “completely transformed . . .” One wave of expansion began just after the Napoleonic Wars, because merchants and governments, in their quest for “international markets and commercial products,” found that there were huge opportunities afoot for collecting plants, animals and mineral specimens. The resulting new collections were unprecedented in natural history because they were curated by scientifically trained collectors who understood just “what was of scientific interest” in the specimens, and their knowledge was reflected in how the objects were preserved and displayed. The Sea Serpent would have been part of the world of the museums and collections, if concrete evidence for the creature had been secured.¹³²

¹³² Les W. Field, “Natural History,” *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 4, ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz, (Detroit: Scribner, 2005): 1598-1599, *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2005, 11-2013

Despite expanding collections and the improvements in curatorial skill, in the context of the Early Republic as described by Andrew Lewis, natural history was both scientific and non-scientific, and composed of Andrew “a constellation of unstable and contested practices that comprise a method of interrogating the natural world” and a “means of explaining collected information about nature” that included certain prejudices against systematic and theoretical thought. The mediums for the study of natural history among non-scientists were, for people who could access them, collections and museums, but most natural history data was communicated via “words in print . . . images and maps” and specific accounts of species and regions.¹³³

In this period, moreover, as has been seen, Americans privileged the inductive method of securing multiple testimonies to verify the existence of a non-descript over the suggestions of deductive reasoning. Experiments, though “useful,” were thought to be inconclusive because they required thought and method, and, unavoidably, “some degree of theory.” Americans believed that one could be led astray by theory or systematic thinking in the pursuit of knowledge because, first, such methods were thought to be more characteristic of European thought than American, and second, they were also believed to have led Europeans to inaccurate results and conclusions about natural history in America. American natural history did not employ hierarchical, theoretical thought, nor was it designed to systematize a body of pre-existing knowledge; its aim was the garnering and

¹³³ Andrew J. Lewis, *Democracy of Facts*, 6

assemblage of facts, which required only opportunity, clear perception, and good recording methods.¹³⁴

As Americans were getting to know their new national, natural world, the new nation's scientific community inhabited the universities and scientific societies. The two most prominent and important in the U.S. were the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, founded in 1791 in Boston, and the American Philosophical Society, founded in 1743, in Philadelphia. Two more local scientific societies will be discussed in this chapter, the Linnaean Society of New England, founded in 1814, and based in Boston, and the New York Lyceum of Natural History, now called the New York Academy of Sciences, founded in 1817.

Before the revolution, the colonial relationship among scientists in the Anglo-American world had been similar in form to mercantilist trade, "the American colonies were purveyors of raw materials—astronomical observations, seeds, plants, shells, and fossils—which were worked into finished products in the scientific centers of the Old World." In this manner was the colonial political relationship manifest in American scientific practice, and in spite of the nation extricating itself from political subjection to Britain in 1783, such scientific practices persisted until around 1820. The continuity over both these eras was argued by John C. Green, a professor of History at the University of Connecticut, who wrote in 1968 that "to judge only by the working relationships between British and

¹³⁴ Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts*, 25, 34

American scientists, no great change was brought about by the break with the mother country.”¹³⁵

After the Revolution, scientific or learned American naturalists tried to re-formulate the practice of natural history with the scientifically interested public by re-constructing, in social and intellectual terms, the colonial relationship. This time however, the raw materials would come from public reporting of facts and collection of specimens, and the refined intellectual product would come from the academy scientists in the university and scientific societies. The new practice was not universally adopted, and Andrew Lewis characterizes it as “Pollyannaish,” because first, few laypeople responded to the petitions for materials, second, when they did, naturalists did not respond. Finally and moreover, there was much public confusion about what types of things the naturalists were requesting and what materials possessed value, and yet more “confusion over the goals of taxonomic history . . .” By 1817, when David Humphreys and the Linnaean Society’s Committee were inquiring into the Sea Serpent phenomenon, scientific naturalists had lost their enthusiasm for the “democratic, market-oriented” approach to specimens and accounts of nature, they had long since fallen back “on tried and true methods.”¹³⁶

One of these was replicating again the type of communication they had had in the colonial relationship they enjoyed before. American scientific naturalists, by

¹³⁵ John C. Greene, “American Science Comes of Age, 1780-1820,” *Journal of American History*, 55 1, (Jun. 1968): 34, 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1894249> JSTOR, 3-2012

¹³⁶ Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts*, 48-49

the early nineteenth-century, chose to correspond only with people they knew to be “trustworthy and already versed in natural historical methods,” and so they turned their backs on a “haphazard, fee-for-service correspondence with an unknown correspondent or frontier resident.” Along with the older patterns of communication and evidence gathering, the “established naturalists replicated the patterns and epistemology of the colonial era . . . [in essence] they followed precedent and called it new.” The retrograde tendency is evident in the Committee’s utter dependence on Gloucester magistrate Lonson Nash, who, along with David Humphreys, had first-hand experience listening to accounts and interrogating deponents directly. The Committee questioned the deponents indirectly, and was privy only to what they said as transcribed. Because they did not actually question the deponents, the Committee was oblivious to the implications their answers may have carried, they could not evaluate the relative state of certainty of each deponent, and they were unable to question unclear statements further. The process by which the accounts were garnered, transcribed, and delivered indicates first, the tendency to delegate the work of research to a trustworthy member of the public, in this case, Nash, and second, it shows the relative unimportance of descriptive evidence in the scientific evaluation of the phenomenon generally.¹³⁷

While the existence of the sea serpent remained in doubt, the presence and abundance of sea serpent narratives could not be denied. By 1850, the evidence

¹³⁷ Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts*, 49

scientific naturalists had found supported one conclusion: that sea serpents were perceptual anomalies caused by the form or movement of other sea animals already known and catalogued. Their conclusions concerning description, regardless of their reasoning, put the sea serpent, along with beauty and truth, into the eye of the beholder. Some of the intellectuals discussed here, the Linnaean Society Committee members, John Davis, Jacob Bigelow, and Francis Gray, Charles Lyell and Richard Owen, collected descriptive evidence of sea serpents, but *they reasoned nothing from it*. The Linnaean Society Committee, for example, collected evidence and reasoned in a manner that subordinated the authority of description to the authority of their only concrete evidence, a small carcass of a deformed black snake. Moreover, the scientists Lyell and Owen, working several decades later, dismissed descriptive evidence from Norway and New England entirely and reasoned their conclusions from another concrete finding, the “Stronsa Animal.” Without any more concrete evidence, having so reasoned, and with satisfaction in their conclusions, these inquirers ceased to study the sea serpent, and turned their questions about the phenomenon from the object to the observer. As Chandos Michael Brown stated of the “Gloucester Sea Serpent,” “the emphasis” in scientific evaluations of the phenomenon “shifted from the serpent, which stubbornly eludes exact description, to the character of those who swear to have seen it. Lacking the specimen, the testimony itself becomes the object of the naturalist's inquiry.”¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Chandos Michael Brown, “A Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent: Knowledge, Power, and the Culture of Science in Early Antebellum America, *American Quarterly*, 42 3, (Sept. 1990): 404

The pin around which this wheel is turning is the quality of evidence, and in particular, descriptive evidence, in the scientific inquiry of the New England Sea Serpent, 1817-1830. The most original of the scientific observers, and the only two who reasoned anything meaningful from the narrative evidence, were Constantine Rafinesque and Samuel L. Mitchill. Rafinesque was an immigrant from Sicily who immigrated to the United States in 1815 and attended the University of Lexington in Kentucky. He helped to found the Lyceum of Natural History in New York City, and in 1817, published a book titled *Florula Ludoviciana*. The work provoked some “animosity” on the part of “many of his colleagues,” because he had classified and named plants based on information “from the published account of the French traveler C.C. Robin” instead of first-hand observation. Rafinesque often used descriptive evidence as his primary sources in classifying animals, and the case of the sea serpent was no exception.

Samuel L. Mitchill, also a founding member of the Lyceum of Natural History, had been through more or less the same process of study and inquiry, but concluded that turned the question from the object to the observer. Mitchill articulated his ideas in 1828, in a way that cut across scientific and non-scientific discourses, and put the logos in dialogue with the mythos dimensions of the sea serpent phenomenon. More detailed discussions of the Linnaean Society of New England’s report, David Humphreys’ inquiry, Samuel L. Mitchill, and Constantine S. Rafinesque as well as the historiography of naming the Sea Serpent and his cultural

dimensions will be forthcoming, but first, this chapter will briefly discuss the Atlantic history of sea serpents that preceded the phenomenon in New England.¹³⁹

In his brief essay, “Some Observations on the Sea Serpent,” 1818, the New England naturalist William Dandridge Peck observed that the Sea Serpent was peculiar to the modern era because in his study of the texts of ancient naturalists, he found no evidence that “what is called the Sea Serpent was known in their times.”¹⁴⁰ The first writer to treat of sea serpents, Olaf Magnusson or Olaus Magnus, 1490?-1557, was the brother of a refugee Catholic archbishop, Johannes Magnusson. Both had fled Sweden in a period of political unrest in 1523, and lived in Rome. In 1544, when the Johannes died, Olaus inherited his brother’s title as Archbishop of Uppsala, but since he was not able to return to Sweden, he “set about telling the world about the land he had lost.”¹⁴¹ His *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* was published in Rome in 1555, and appeared in an English translation that was titled *A Compendious History of the Goths, Svvedes, and Vandals and Other Northern Nations* in 1668. Magnus describes two serpents, one that lives near the ocean, and the other that lives in fresh water. The salt-water serpent seems to be amphibious, for it is “wont to live in Rocks and Caves toward the Sea-coast about *Berge[n]* . . .” and this same serpent emerges from “his holes

¹³⁹ Charles Boewe, “Rafinesque, Constantine Samuel,” *American National Biography Online*, <http://www.anb.org/articles/13/13-01344.html>, 7-2012

¹⁴⁰ William Dandridge Peck. “Article IX. Some Observations on the Sea Serpent,” *Quarterly Journal of Literature, Science and the Arts*, (VII: XIII, 1819): 63-72. <http://books.google.com/books?id=5187AQAIAAJ&lpg=PA68&ots=8EEWikL8rw&dq=Peck%2C%20W.D.%20On%20the%20Sea%20Serpent&pg=PA69#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, accessed Apr. 2012

¹⁴¹ Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, Trans. Richard Garnett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), 91

on a clear night” to “devour Calves, Lambs and Hogs, or else he goes into the Sea to feed on Polypus, Locusts, and all sorts of Sea Crabs.”¹⁴² Magnus described both as portents, and in particular, the salt-water serpent “disquiets the shippers, and he puts his head on high like a pillar, and catcheth away men and devours them,” and should he leave sailors alone, “it signifies some wonderful change in the Kingdom near at hand,” which could be either the banishment or death of princes or a war.¹⁴³ The sea serpent was included in several bestiaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries by Conrad Gesner, 1560, Edward Topsell, 1609, Ulisses Aldrovandi, 1640, Jon Jonston, 1653, and Walter Charleton, 1668, and all these repeated Magnus’s descriptions, and the peculiar mix of fear and the marvelous.¹⁴⁴ Though Erik Pontoppidan’s *Natural History of Norway*, 1752, 1754, with its reproduction of the narratives first, of the missionary to Greenland, Hans Egede in 1734 and second, that of Lawrence Von Ferry in 1751, was interesting to news readers in the early nineteenth-century United States. Its descriptions of krakens and sea serpents provoked no intellectual debate, and by the mid-eighteenth-century, the sea serpent narrative had jumped from superstition to description; scholars of succeeding decades might hope that the monsters Pontoppidan catalogued would be taxonomically classified.

¹⁴² Olaus Magnus. *Compendious History of the Goths, Svvedes, and Vandals and Other Northern Nations*, (London, 1658), quoted in Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 92

¹⁴³ Olaus Magnus. *Compendious History of the Goths, Svvedes, and Vandals and Other Northern Nations*, quoted in Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 92

¹⁴⁴ Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 93

The sea serpent off the New England coast was first described at second hand by a traveler, John Josselyn in *An Account of Two Voyages to New-England, made during the Years, 1638, 1663, 1674*, but was not dealt within an historical or scientific frame of understanding until the Rev. Alden Bradford of Wiscasset started, via correspondence, collecting reports of the sea serpent soon after 1800. Bradford graduated from Harvard in 1786, he was a clergyman, wrote history from a Federalist view, and is best remembered as the Secretary of the Commonwealth in Massachusetts between 1812 and 1824. Though he wrote several histories from a New England perspective over the course of his life, he never published anything on the Sea Serpent.

Bradford is of interest here for what he did do with his compilation of Sea Serpent accounts from New England in 1804. On May 22, Bradford wrote a letter with several enclosures in it to John Quincy Adams, then the Secretary of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The letter was misplaced, and laid at the bottom of a drawer for eighteen years, until it was recovered and its contents published in the *Boston Intelligencer* as "Original Miscellany," on August 19, 1820 and in *The American Journal of Science and the Arts*, in November, 1820 by Jacob Bigelow, a physician, botanist and member of the Linnaean Society's Committee that studied the Sea Serpent in August, 1817.

The documents enclosed in Bradford's letter Bradford's documents and 1804 letter revealed a body of sea-serpent sightings in New England extant several

decades before the phenomenon of 1815-1825, and he wrote in his cover letter that his collection provided conclusive proof that, in the vicinity of Penobscot Bay, the “existence of such a *Monster* can no longer be disputed.” In submitting his letter to the Society, he wanted to prove the animal’s existence and hoped the letters would “operate in favour of further information,” leading to “a particular history of this hitherto undescribed Serpent.”¹⁴⁵

Bradford’s letter, the possible reasons for its misplacement, and Bradford’s failure, or, perhaps, refusal, to write publicly about his experiences corresponding with sea serpent observers, represent the interaction of social class expectations, sources of authority and communication in the Early Republic. Richard D. Brown treats the creation of information networks in port towns and cities in the Early Republic in his book *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865*. Brown admits that “no one has yet attempted a comprehensive survey of information diffusion in port towns,” and his chapter dealing most generally with this subject, ranges from 1760 to 1790, and focuses on communications to and by merchants. He explains that among merchants, the “paramount” form of communication was conversation, and then, “because letters were nominally private exchanges between respected acquaintances they possessed a higher degree of credibility than newspapers.” In spite of merchants

¹⁴⁵ Jacob Bigelow. “4. Documents and Remarks Respecting the Sea Serpent; . . .,” *American Journal of Science and Arts*, II 2 (Nov. 1820), 147
<http://books.google.ca/books?id=WLkoAQAAMAAJ&dq=american%20journal%2C%20science%2C%20arts%2C%201820&pg=PA147#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, July, 2012 ,

being enthusiastic readers of newspapers, the newspaper was “important, though apparently secondary to face-to-face contacts and letters.”¹⁴⁶

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences’ misplacement of the Bradford letter collection was emblematic of the scientific community’s contemptuous avoidance of descriptive evidence for the Sea Serpent even before 1817, and the peripheral nature of the sea serpent inquiry in relation to the larger objectives of natural history and its component disciplines. The writer of the *Boston Intelligencer* historical report series run in August and September 1820 observed, “though the different descriptions of the phenomenon were similar, yet the Academy thought them incredible, and did not make the statements publick.” Clearly, as early as 1804, scientific observers were uninterested in the Sea Serpent, and consciously walling off their inquiries into American nature, and their procedures concerning evidence, from the non-scientific discourse of natural history in the U.S. that was played out in print.¹⁴⁷

Another more regional aspect of scientific disinterest in the Sea Serpent had to do with certain cultural manifestations of a national political division, that between Federalists and Republicans. The Federalist Party’s last great stronghold in the U.S. was New England, the home of the Sea Serpent. And yet, as we have seen, New England’s scientific society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, misplaced the letters sent by future Federalist office-holder Alden Bradford.

¹⁴⁶ Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford U P, 1989): 114-5

¹⁴⁷ “Original Miscellany, the Great Sea Serpent,” *Boston Intelligencer*, 19 Aug. 1820

In the national-political conflict of the first fifteen years of the nineteenth-century, the inquiries and objects of natural history were avenues of nationalist expression and composed a powerful point of difference between the Federalists of New England and the majority Republicans outside of the region. Between New England, the Mid-Atlantic and Southern states, an “informal” division of intellectual labor had taken shape through the colonial period in which “the sea-faring New Englanders had come naturally to astronomy” as an aid to navigation. Outside New England, there seemed to be less interest in astronomy. Kerber argues that after 1800, “a comparison of the published papers of the two . . . scientific societies suggests that the Boston-based American Academy of Arts and Sciences tended to stress mathematical and astronomical studies at the expense of natural history; Philadelphia’s American Philosophical Society encouraged descriptive work in botany, geology, and paleontology, placing comparatively less emphasis on the natural sciences.” In the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, this old, utilitarian-based division of labor in intellectual endeavor “came to take on a political dimension . . .”¹⁴⁸

This political dimension was evident in the Federalists’ treatment of Thomas Jefferson’s interest in natural history in their political writing. Jefferson was, Kerber argues, “one of the first American students of what is now called vertebrate paleontology,” that is, the collection of fossils and the reconstruction of animals

¹⁴⁸ Linda K. Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America*, (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1980), 76

through fossil bones. In his *Notes On the State of Virginia*, Jefferson had “accepted the Indian ‘tradition’” that bones “of unparalleled magnitude,” still buried, could be found on the banks of the Ohio River, and even entertained the notion that a large mammoth-like creature might still live in the North American interior. Then Federalist John Quincy Adams, writing in 1807 in the *Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*, ridiculed this idea based on the Corps of Discovery’s failure to find any mammoth-like creature.¹⁴⁹

Like many naturalists and observers, Jefferson found concrete evidence of monstrous creatures living in the past, which made people look for wonders in the early nineteenth-century. His best-known work in paleontology was a paper he gave to the American Philosophical Society in March, 1787, concerning animal bones found in a cave west of the Blue Ridge. Among them was found “a fragment of a great claw,” larger than that of a lion, and in the paper, Jefferson imagined the animal stalking the first explorers of the region, his eyes “like balls of fire,” and suggested the name *Megalonyx* for the creature, after his “great claw.” Georges Cuvier and Caspar Wistar, not long afterward, “more accurately identified the animal as an extinct giant sloth.” In spite of their disinterest in the study of natural history, Federalist satirists frequently used Jefferson’s examinations of the bones of mammoths and the fossil features of the megalonyx, and his visualizations of the creatures, to imply “that an active interest in bones” was “at least dim-witted, and possibly evidence of mental disturbance.” In so saying, they seem to have

¹⁴⁹ Kerber, *Federalists In Dissent*, 70

dismissed the existence of a scientific imagination, a faculty necessary for the formation and use of theory and systematic thought.¹⁵⁰

The stuff of natural history, fossil bones in particular, prompted much imagining generally among people about monstrous creatures, both in the past and in their midst. Indeed, Sherrie Lyons argues that the Sea Serpent phenomenon in New England was attributable to “developments in science” because “increased exploration of the sea combined with paleontological finds suggested that the ‘mythical’ sea monster might not be a myth . . .” In the 1820s, quarrymen in southern England were discovering “crocodile-like fossils,” that were identified later as *Ichthyosaurs* and *Plesiosaurs*. Several Later, several scientists in the mid-nineteenth-century, Louis Agassiz, Heinrich Rathke and Sir William Hooker and Charles Lyell for example, were all “on record in support of the serpent’s existence.”¹⁵¹

The assumption that because monstrous creatures lived in the past whose existence is proven by fossils, therefore, a monstrous creature might live in the present, is evident in the Sea Serpent phenomenon about one year after the Rich Expedition. Among coastal New Englanders, the enthusiastic search for concrete evidence of the living Sea Serpent involved, as we have seen, sending expeditions to capture the creature. In August, 1819, another possible avenue for the acquisition

¹⁵⁰ Linda Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent*, 72

¹⁵¹ Sherrie Lyons, “Chapter 2, Swimming at the Edges of Scientific Respectability, Sea Serpents, Charles Lyell, and the Professionalization of Geology,” *Species, Serpents, Spirits, and Skulls: Science at the Margins in the Victorian Age*, 18, 19

of such evidence became known in a bizarre report run by the *Boston Intelligencer* and the *Gazette* of Portland. "A Skeleton . . . of a strange Fish at least 100 feet long has been preserved at Mount Desert . . ." The article suggested first that the skeleton had been destroyed by fire some years before, and then stated, "at all events the bones are in the possession of a gentleman of respectability." The unnamed person planned to take the Bones to Boston where they would "elucidate the fact of the existence of the sea serpent." The *Boston Intelligencer* followed up the story in October, writing that "Gen. H.A.S. Dearborn, the Collector of this port," out of a "zeal for science" and in order to determine the question of the Sea Serpent's existence, began a correspondence on the Mount Desert skeleton with the Collector of Castine. Dearborn was unable to secure any bones because, according to his correspondent, "none of the bones remain," even though "many of the inhabitants of the place have frequently seen them . . ." ¹⁵²

What Dearborn and the readers of the *Boston Intelligencer* received was only description, an account of a skeleton at Mount Desert. Still, the writer continued speculating that bones from this fabulous skeleton might have been collected in museums in Boston and Connecticut. "If these are fortunately preserved . . . they may strengthen the evidence, not merely in favor of the . . . sea serpent, for that is placed beyond controversy, if human testimony is to be believed," but would yield more information about the "conformation of his spine and his various powers of motion." The pursuit produced nothing, it is included

¹⁵² "Sea-Serpent," *Boston Intelligencer*, 3 Oct. 1819

here to show the linkage between the Sea Serpent phenomenon as shown in the intense desire to secure concrete evidence, the widespread interest in fossil hunting and fossil finds at the time, and to show that even non-scientists made the distinction between descriptive and concrete evidence, and privileged privileging the latter over the former as proof. Sea serpents, as associated with the fossil record, achieved “a level of scientific legitimacy in the nineteenth-century” unseen before or since, and an aspect of that legitimacy was the real possibility of finding concrete evidence, that would bear out description.¹⁵³

The sea serpent’s “legitimacy” in scientific inquiry eroded over the course of the early to mid nineteenth-century for lack of concrete evidence and the absence of “actual specimens meant that the sea monster did not fall into the category of solvable problems.” Because of the social, yet self-conscious processes of epistemology-formation and vocational definition in natural history, the sea serpent was found to have “too many liabilities to be fully embraced by individuals who wanted boundaries drawn between professional and amateur” in the “emerging disciplines” of paleontology and geology. There was also the sense that, in disciplines in which there remained so much to be learned, it was futile to complicate “the view of earth history by searching for a creature that . . . might still properly belong to the realm of imagination rather than the domain of the scientist.” These are also likely explanations for why a collection of sea serpent

¹⁵³ *Gazette*, [Portland, MA], 24 Aug. 1819; “Sea-Serpent,” *Boston Intelligencer*, 3 Oct. 1819

accounts was misplaced for eighteen years at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.¹⁵⁴

The issues of natural history and nationalism, description and concrete evidence, also arose in 1808-9, in connection with the Stronsa Animal, a set of marine remains found on the coast of Stronsay, one of the Orkney Islands. In autumn, 1808, after the remains had washed up onto the shore of the island, they were encountered and examined by several men over the course a few days, the most communicative of whom was a Member of Parliament named Malcolm Laing. After some correspondence among themselves on the find, on February 11, 1809, the Wernerian Natural History Society in Edinburgh classified the creature, naming it *Halsydrus Pontopiddani*, or sea snake of Pontopiddan.¹⁵⁵

Later, on Stronsay, over the course of the winter, 1808-9, Malcolm Laing collected several affidavits from Stronsay residents and sent them to Sir Joseph Banks, the scientist to whom New Englander David Humphreys would write his published letters on the “Serpent of the Ocean” in 1817. Banks passed the data on to Everard Home, a London surgeon and naturalist. Home dismissed the collected accounts as unreliable, chiefly because “the witnesses were “dealing with a mutilated and putrefied body, not with a perfect one.” He classified the remains as belonging to the *Squalus Maximus*, the basking shark. His published conclusions in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* in London, 1809, brought to light

¹⁵⁴ Sherrie Lyons. “Sea Monsters: Myth or Genuine Relic of the Past,” 68

¹⁵⁵ Bernard Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 119-120

a divide in perception of the Stronsa Animal between the English and the Scots. Scottish naturalists took issue with Home's basking shark identification and his mistrust of their descriptive evidence, and so "defended the anomalous nature of the 'Animal' with dogged pertinacity for many years." The Scots were also offended by the contemptuous tone Home took toward their evidence, in particular, their description, and so "whenever the affair was resuscitated," Scottish naturalists would cast aspersions and doubt "on Home's verdict, for their pride had been hurt and . . . they were still spoiling for a fight."¹⁵⁶

In the case of the inquiries into the Stronsa Animal, we have a British analogue predating Sea Serpent phenomenon as it occurred in New England in 1817. There was the drama of national pride played out over the identification of a few bones by two members of the United Kingdom. In addition, a large marine animal had been seen in the early spring of 1808 in the Hebrides, and descriptive evidence of it was sent to the Wernerian Society. In autumn of the same year, there was the stranding of the Stronsa Animal. There is no evidence that members of the Wernerian Society considered them the same, but taken together, the society's conclusions, and the logic of narrative suggest an erroneous, causal connection of the coincidences.¹⁵⁷

Moving forward to New England, in the autumn of 1817, as sea serpent narratives were circulating in newspapers and broadsides, they became interesting

¹⁵⁶ Gould. *Case for the Sea Serpent*, 246;
Heuvelmans. *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 127

¹⁵⁷ Rupert T. Gould, *The Case for the Sea Serpent*, (London: Allan, 1933), 252

to learned men like John Davis, 1761-1847, Jacob Bigelow, 1787-1879, Francis Calley Gray, 1790-1856, William Dandridge Peck, 1763-1822, Constantine S. Rafinesque and Samuel L. Mitchill, 1764-1831. Americans had been collecting scientifically fascinating objects from the world around them and shipping the specimens off to Europe for decades, and as collectors, they held a subordinate position to both in the Anglo-American and European scientific establishments. Chandos Michael Brown argues that when confronted with the dynamic of collecting evidence of the Sea Serpent for European classification, American scientists balked, out of the “virtually sublime confidence that the natural history of America was somehow more compelling, more robust, than that of Europe.”¹⁵⁸

The American moment in sea serpent science came in 1817, with the publication of *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society . . . Relative to a Large Marine Animal* by the Linnaean Society of New England. The Linnaean Society of New England was formed in 1814 from the Society for the Promotion of Natural History. The Linnaean Society had three objectives that accord with those of natural history generally, they wanted to collect and display “natural objects,” to study whatever specimens came their way, and to educate the public on the subject by running a museum at Boylston Hall in Boston. Though the society’s membership was by invitation, most of the members were “physicians . . . interested in natural history.” Though such men might seem to be mere “cultivators” according to

¹⁵⁸ Chandos Michael Brown. “A Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent: Knowledge, Power, and the Culture of Science in Antebellum America,” *American Quarterly*, 406-408

Gillespie's scheme for understanding amateurs in natural history, the society members themselves did, in part-time and irregular fashion, the work of researchers and practitioners. They went on research trips that generated discoveries, the most notable of these being one in 1816 to the mountainous regions of New Hampshire and Vermont, and another into the Azores. They had meetings, presented their findings in papers, and were, in 1817, an "active society, whose unostentatious labours deserve to be more generally known . . ." ¹⁵⁹

All three of the committee members, Judge John Davis, Jacob Bigelow and Francis C. Gray, were Harvard graduates, and of them, only Bigelow had distinguished himself in the field of natural history by way of his publication of *Florula Bostoniensis* in 1814, a catalogue of the flora within a ten-mile radius of Boston. Later editions of the work expanded the area of coverage, and it "remained the standard manual of New England botany until Asa Gray's manual was published in 1848." Both the *Florula Bostoniensis*, 1814, and the Linnaean Society Committee's *Report . . . Relative a Large Marine Animal . . .*, 1817, are apt illustrations public and national values as reflected in the natural history writing in the period, "as a means of explaining the natural world, early republic natural history was descriptive," the descriptions running from "the close-read

¹⁵⁹ Richard Johnson. "The Rise and Fall of the Boston Natural History Society," *Northeastern Naturalist*, 11 1, (2004), 81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3858546> JSTOR, 12-2013; J.P. O'Neill, *The Great New-England Sea Serpent: An Account of Unknown Creatures . . .*, (Camden, ME: Down East, 1999), 45 "Linnaean Society of New England," *North American Review*, 6 16, (Nov. 1817), 141-142, <http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=nora;cc=nora;rgn=full%20text;idno=nora0006-1;didno=nora0006-1;view=image;seq=0147;node=nora0006-1%3A16> *Making of America*, 12-2013

characteristics of a single tree—to a description of an entire neighborhood, state or region.” The inclusion of Davis and Gray, two men eminent in the legal profession, indicates the society’s reliance on judicial thinking and authority in the pursuit of truth concerning the Sea Serpent.¹⁶⁰

The committee members possessed “varying degrees of excitement” about the study of the sea serpent, but, because “travel was hazardous and expensive,” they decided to follow a common practice at the time and rely on local correspondents to gather description and send specimens. In addition, because they were “expecting testimonial” more than “real evidence,” they “deputized” Lonson Nash, a Justice of the Peace, in Gloucester.¹⁶¹

The members of the committee undermined the usefulness of the descriptive evidence by the procedures they laid down for its collection to Lonson Nash. Nash was instructed to adhere to a list of 25 questions in his interrogations, but he did not adhere to them consistently, so the accounts vary. Each deponent testified individually, beyond the hearing of others, and all were forbidden to discuss the sea serpent or their answers among each other until all the depositions had been signed. Furthermore, the instructions forbade Nash from cross-examining witnesses or asking exclusionary questions that would have given rise to comparative statements, and in so doing, the committee worked from a pre-

¹⁶⁰ Olivia Walling, “Jacob Bigelow,” *American National Biography Online*, <http://www.anb.org/articles/12/12-00076.html>, accessed Aug. 2012; Andrew J. Lewis, *Democracy of Facts*, 6

¹⁶¹ J.P. O’Neill, *The Great New-England Sea Serpent*, 45
Wayne Soini, *Gloucester’s Sea Serpent*, (Charleston and London: History, 2010): 38

conceived idea of what the sea serpent was. Yet, in science, “knowledgeable comparisons are the foundation from which to prove the ‘new’ part of any claimed ‘new species,’” and so by defining such narrow questioning procedures, the committee and Nash lessened their chances of collecting complete and truthful narratives. Their approach to the work was deductive without being theoretical, and the form of their report had the appearance of a mere assemblage of facts.¹⁶²

Every crypto-zoological and historical treatment of the Linnaean Society report, with the exception of Soini, includes the questions the committee gave Nash, but more important, and more subtle, are the content and rhetoric of the written narratives that precede each set of answers. The first most important question concerning the accounts of the report is who made them.

One of the chief weaknesses of the *Report* is its tenacious assertion that the sea serpent is a serpent, a large reptile, instead of a serpentiform creature. The rhetoric of the testimonies is odd in that it contains one phrase repeated quite often and varied only slightly in construction between the accounts, that is, the assertion that the deponent has seen something he believes to be a serpent. Amos Story is recorded as saying, “I saw a strange marine animal that I believe to be a serpent . . .”¹⁶³ Solomon Allen 3d also saw an animal he believed to be a serpent,

¹⁶² Soini, *Gloucester’s Sea Serpent*, 40

¹⁶³ John Davis, Jacob Bigelow, Francis C. Gray, *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society . . . Relative to a Large Marine Animal . . .* (Boston: Hilliard, 1817. S41272, *Early American Imprints, Series II, Shaw Shoemaker*. Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 2004): 10

and Epes Ellery thought the animal he saw was a serpent.¹⁶⁴ William Foster said he saw “an uncommon sea animal” that he believed was a serpent, and Matthew Gaffney’s sea animal “resembled a serpent.”¹⁶⁵ Mansfield, Johnson, and Pearson all believed or thought they saw a serpent and asserted as much, using phrasing identical to the direct quotations above, in the first sentences of their narratives.¹⁶⁶ Different officials in Boston took the last three depositions, and they make no mention of a serpent except for William Somerby, who called what he saw “a strange animal of the serpent form . . .”¹⁶⁷ Somerby concedes that the animal was serpentine in form, which takes the designation “serpent” and confines it to a feature.

But, the term, “serpent,” as used by the first set of the Linnaean Society deponents, such that it describes the animal’s nature and suggests its taxonomic place, not a single feature or its form. In making this essential and even theoretical statement about the Sea Serpent, and having it repeated across the accounts, Nash and the committee endowed merchants and mariners with scientific authority, that is, the authority to determine by implication and with one word, the Sea Serpent’s class, *Reptilia*, order, *Squamata*, and suborder, *Serpentes*. I would argue that an essential statement of the creature’s classification by a lay observer is always subjective, and thus should not be considered authoritative. The authority of description lies in its objective elements, what people in the early nineteenth-

¹⁶⁴ Davis, Bigelow, Gray, *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society* . . . , 11, 13

¹⁶⁵ Davis, Bigelow, Gray, *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society* . . . , 14, 16

¹⁶⁶ Davis, Bigelow, Gray, *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society* . . . , 17, 18, 19

¹⁶⁷ Davis, Bigelow, Gray, *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society* . . . , 20-23

century would have called “facts,” not in subjective conclusions. Conveniently, as taken, or written, all of Nash’s depositions, with this constantly repeated essential statement, confirmed the committee’s hypothesis.

To help highlight the unusual rhetoric of the Linnaean Society deponents’ accounts, there is the group of depositions simultaneously collected by Charles Lenox Sargent in Gloucester for his purpose of writing a book on the phenomenon later. Sargent wrote two other books, the *System of General Signals for Night and Day*, 1817, and the *Life of Alexander Smith, Captain of the Island of Pitcairn*, 1819. Though he collected a group of accounts that provided source material for many newspaper reports, he never published anything on the Sea Serpent himself. Among his deponents, John Low tells us that “he saw the Serpent between the Beach and Stage Point”; Captain Corlis “saw the Serpent lying still on the surface of the water”; John Somes “saw the Serpent . . . lying between the Beach and Stage Point” Joseph Moores and Jonathan Brown both saw “a black substance” on the water, and William Saville gendered the “something” he saw as male, but did not use the word “serpent” to denote it. The rhetoric of Sargent’s deponents is more specific, and the social positions and vocations of the deponents, though rarely stated, seem diverse. Captain Corlis was in a boat, and John Somes owned a rope walk on the beach. Sargent’s deponents do not concentrate on the essential

nature of the appearance, they tell us where they were, what they were doing, and then where the “Serpent” was, what he looked like, and what he was doing.¹⁶⁸

After the Linnaean Society of New England’s *Report* was completed and received by naturalists on both sides of the Atlantic, there appeared to be no more scientific interest in studying New England’s Sea Serpent. The content of the *Report* helps explain why. In order to create a more complete scientific statement, one that would prove that Americans were more than just collectors of objects, committee members Davis, Bigelow, and Gray needed to hypothesize from their evidence. Their attempt at explanation, “Account of the *Scoliophis Atlanticus*,” was facilitated by the dispatching of a deformed *Coluber Constrictor*, or black snake at Cape Ann on September, 27, 1817. They examined the animal and, called it a non-descript, and gave it a unique classification: *Scoliophis Atlanticus*, in spite of their admission that “in the general disposition of its colours, in the number, form and arrangement of the scuta and scutellae, this animal approaches most nearly to the *Coluber Constrictor* . . .” They likened the features of the lesser carcass to those of the “great Serpent” in the collected narratives, and concluded, “supposing that the species of the two serpents is the same, it is not improbable that one is the progeny of the other.”¹⁶⁹ By this supposition, the Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England had turned the sublime into the ridiculous, for the responses to the *Report*’s hypothesis were stinging. A Professor of Zoology and Comparative

¹⁶⁸ “The Sea Serpent, Evidence About It: Testimony Collected by C.L. Sargent,” Cape Ann Museum.

¹⁶⁹ Davis, Bigelow, Gray, *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society* . . . , 40, 48

Anatomy in Paris, Ducotay de Blaineville, who reviewed the *Report* for *Journal De Physique, de Chimie et d'Histoire Naturelle*, admitted that he “found it hard to deny the existence of the great sea-serpent,” but could find “no good reason to connect this huge animal with the little specimen . . .” Alexandre Leseur, Samuel L. Mitchill and William D. Peck, upon observing the illustrations of the *Report*, concluded that the creature dissected there was a deformed black snake, and not a member of a non-descript species.¹⁷⁰

History has been no kinder to the Linnaean Society’s conclusions than its contemporary readers. In 1930, the retired Royal Navy officer Rupert T. Gould observed that in their attempt to explain their evidence and hypothesize a classification for the sea serpent, “the committee went out of their way to stultify the valuable work which they had performed.”¹⁷¹ Chandos Michael Brown argued that “the credibility of the witnesses,” which I have argued either Nash or the committee undermined by endowing their statements with scientific authority, “and the physical specimen of the *Scoliophis* would have to serve as a basis for classification,” and so “through the force of rhetoric, not reason,” they “established the relationship between *Scoliophis* and the larger sea serpent for the purpose of classifying the latter.” The Linnaean Society, managed to attach “its name to the Gloucester Sea Serpent, but the headlong rush to promote that connection exposed

¹⁷⁰ Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 155;
J.P. O’Neill. *The Great New England Sea Serpent: An Account of Unknown Creatures . . .* (Maine: Down East, 1999), 56

¹⁷¹ Rupert T. Gould. *The Case for the Sea Serpent*, (London: Allan, 1930): 55

it to ridicule, gentle and otherwise.”¹⁷² Because “the committee’s desire for a specimen overcame its scientific discipline,” argued Wayne Soini in 2010, the result was that “. . . scientists everywhere—rejected the book with its fold-out snake centerfold.”¹⁷³ Zoologist Bernard Heuvelmans observed, “after the appalling bloomer made by the Boston committee . . . no scientist dared take the sea serpent seriously.”¹⁷⁴

With the discrediting of the Linnaean Society’s *Report*, we can readily imagine the body of descriptive evidence, traditional and historical narratives of the Early Modern Era, along with the composite type constructed from the blizzard of printed reports in our first chapter, suspended and inert after 1820, until the middle of the nineteenth-century. Still, there were scientists working between 1817 and 1829, William D. Peck, David Humphreys, Constantine S. Rafinesque, and Samuel L. Mitchill, who perceived the descriptive evidence of the Sea Serpent differently and came to interesting conclusions when they shifted the contending question the Sea Serpent’s existence to the manner of the creature’s existence in New England American cultural and intellectual life.

William Dandridge Peck is a minor figure in the sea serpent phenomenon, but a significant figure in the development of the biological sciences in the Early National Period. His *American National Biography* entry does not state that he was

¹⁷² Chandos Michael Brown, “Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent,” *American Quarterly*, 415, 416

¹⁷³ Wayne Soini. *Gloucester’s Sea Serpent*, 115

¹⁷⁴ Bernard Heuvelmans. *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 162

a member of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences. Nevertheless, in 1794, he published a paper titled “A Description of Four Remarkable Fishes,” in the *Memoir* of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which has been called “the first systematic paper published on zoology in the United States.” In 1805, Peck was appointed to a chair in natural history at Harvard. His particular interests were entomology and botany, and he published extensively on the former.¹⁷⁵

He Peck wrote one article about the Sea Serpent phenomenon in 1819, “Some Observations on the Sea Serpent,” that was printed in a British periodical, the *Quarterly Journal of Literature, Science and the Arts*. From his initial observations, it is evident that certain attitudes toward the study of natural history, and toward description had changed at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, for “the appearance . . . of an enormous animal of the serpentine order, is a fact so remarkable here, and so interesting to naturalists everywhere, that the Academy . . . were of opinion that some notice of it should appear in their next publication . . .” As seen before, Peck argued that sea serpents were a modern phenomenon, and he begins his discussion of the history of human interaction with them at the same place I have—with the works of Olaus Magnus.¹⁷⁶

Peck appreciated the evidentiary value of Sea Serpent accounts, but did not trust that they amounted to a complete description of the phenomenon. Though

¹⁷⁵ W. Conner Sorenson. “Peck, William Dandridge,” <http://www.anb.org/articles/13/13-01285.html> *American National Biography Online*, 8-2012

¹⁷⁶ William Dandridge Peck. “Article IX. Some Observations on the Sea Serpent . . . from the American Philosophical Transactions,” *Quarterly Journal of Literature, Science and the Arts*, 7 (1819): 68-72

the observers were doing the best they could to make disclosures complete and useful, Peck noted that he could not “perceive” by them “that any person has seen its whole length.” He concluded with a list of just what about the creature the accounts made known, “that the existence of the animal to which they relate is indisputable,” that, at least near the water’s surface, “it moves by vertical undulations,” that it is flexible in a lateral and vertical plane, and that “its motion, at times, is very swift.” Finally, speaking toward the accounts themselves, and in light of the absence of a specimen, Peck observed that, in spite of their incompleteness, “the imagination seems to have had no influence” in making them. Peck acknowledged simply “our knowledge is circumscribed by these limits.” Like all the scientists, and many coastal New Englanders, he hoped the Sea Serpent might be captured so that the scientific community in New England might gain “an opportunity of completing our knowledge of so interesting a link in the chain of animated beings.”¹⁷⁷

Aside from the *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society*, the most significant compilation of sea serpent accounts contemporary to the phenomenon in New England, 1817, is the published correspondence of David Humphreys, titled *Letters from the Honorable David Humphreys, F.R.S. to the Rt. Hon. Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society, London; Containing Some Account of the Serpent of the Ocean, Frequently Seen in Gloucester Bay*. Humphreys, (1752-1818), was a non-scientific but learned observer, a man of letters and a diplomat. In 1800, after

¹⁷⁷ Peck, “Some Observations on the Sea Serpent,” 71-72

providing a lifetime of service to the federal government, he lost a diplomatic position because of his long association with the Federalist Party. He spent the rest of his life in the manufacture of woolen goods, and “managed this business with great success in Rimmon Falls, Connecticut,” named Humphreysville in 1808.¹⁷⁸

Humphreys was also a prolific writer, poet, and playwright, whose works are resonant enough to make him a significant literary figure of the period. In writing his published correspondence about the “Serpent of the Ocean,” Humphreys traveled to Salem and Gloucester in August and September, 1817, to put his literary talent to work by engaging it with an experience of the sublime—his own sea serpent sighting. “I repeatedly visited that place [Gloucester Bay], including all the neighbouring coves, with the hope of obtaining a sight of him,” Humphreys wrote on Sept. 2, 1817. If he could not see the serpent for himself, he wrote that he would spend his time “ascertaining how far these reports were well founded.”¹⁷⁹ Chandos Michael Brown emphasizes, “Literature constituted Humphreys' primary frame of reference,” and so “the plot of the Letters--one may plausibly speak of such a thing--balanced on a single conceit. ‘The spirit of inquiry and research has gone forth’ . . .”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Edward M. Cifelli, “Humphreys, David,” *American National Biography Online*, <http://www.anb.org/articles/02/02-00186.html>, 8-2012

¹⁷⁹ David Humphreys, *Letters from the Hon. David Humphreys, F.R.S. to the Rt. Hon. Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society, Containing Some Account of the Serpent of the Ocean . . .*, (New York: Kirk, Mercein, 1817): 2

¹⁸⁰ Brown, *Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent*, 419

Humphreys' last objective was the only one fulfilled, and his interpretation of the sea serpent is not as an organism, but as a phenomenon unique to a specific region. His curiosity is directed mostly toward the people who saw the serpent, and those who tried to catch it, and is, despite its limits, an effective, event-specific, ethnography. Carefully, yet still thoroughly, he probed the community at Gloucester Bay by way of conversation for the very first sea serpent sighting report. He found that the first sea serpent sighting was orally delivered and remembered, when the residents told him that the captain of a coasting vessel from George's River (Maine), having put his ship into the bay, went to a Mr. Lipple's auction-room. The captain said that he and his crew had been "alarmed and frightened at the sight of a terrible-looking creature, resembling a Serpent, close alongside the vessel . . ." The ship, "according to the rate of tonnage" the captain mentioned, was 60 feet long. The sea serpent must have been greater than 60 feet long, because as it swam alongside, its head was in "the chains" of the bow, and its tail extended far beyond the stern. The story was "extraordinary," the teller was "unknown," and "appearing to gain no credit . . . he, in disgust, quitted his hearers and sailed as soon as the wind permitted."¹⁸¹

Though the account is undated, some idea of when it was given becomes evident in the two accounts following. The first of these was also undated and given to Humphreys by Mrs. Amos Story, whose spouse was the first of Nash's deponents for the *Report*. Mrs. Story told Humphreys she saw something that

¹⁸¹ Humphreys, *Letters From the Hon. David Humphreys . . .*, 9

looked like a log at low tide on the beach of Ten Pound Island. “It ought to be noted,” Humphreys wrote, “that the people residing on the east side of the bay are often on the lookout for drift wood,” which they used for fuel, which is why many of them had “spy glasses,” or “good glasses.”¹⁸² It also helps us to understand their familiarity with the movements of the water, of the creatures in it, and the experiences that would qualify such observers as the ones quoted by the *Boston Gazette* in October, 1818, in identifying the sea serpent as a phenomenon.

Humphreys describes Amos Story as “a plain, deliberate man, of unblemished reputation.” When Story started speaking about what he saw on August 10, 1817, as a “*monstrous Serpent*, to some persons,” they responded incredulously, and so to keep his character from being “impeached for his want of adherence to truth, he abstained from speaking further . . .” But the sea serpent he had seen was not some subjective or self-constructed phenomenon, and when he observed that others had seen it and were speaking about it, Story spoke out about his experience again. Humphreys re-printed the abstract of Story’s testimony, given to Nash, along with those of John Johnston, Jr., Epes Ellery, Solomon Allen, 3d, and Matthew Gaffney. He explained the small number of deponents Nash drew upon, writing that although “a host of witnesses might be produced . . . these deponents, being men of respectable characters and moreover, having no motive to impose on

¹⁸² Humphreys, *Letters From the Hon. David Humphreys* . . . , 10

others, have, by their affidavits, settled the long-agitated question . . . the existence of the sea serpent.”¹⁸³

More importantly, Humphreys also divides descriptive material of the accounts between essential characteristics and concrete elements, or, the subjective and objective components of the phenomenon. His first letter states that two-hundred people saw the sea serpent, and “the spectators, in general, agree substantially, as to the form, but vary considerably . . . as to the length of the animal.” He explains that the uncertainty is probably the result of a perceptual problem called looming, in which “owing to the state of the atmosphere, or the point of view, the same floating spar appears sometimes 40, and at others, 100 feet long.” Chandos Michael Brown argues that this is one of the common sense observations in Humphreys’ correspondence that is “notably absent from the avowedly plain-style report of the Linnaean Society.”¹⁸⁴

Of the sea serpent’s nature, Humphreys was more cautious than the Linnaean Society Committee, for, he concluded from his description of the collective encounter, “from his appearance, habits and characteristics, so far as they are known, all concur in representing this hitherto non-descript animal, to possess the attributes of the serpent, and not the fish kind.” And so here, from a literary observer, a non-scientist, we read a statement of comparison and contrast, precisely the type of observation necessary in highlighting the “new” elements in

¹⁸³ Humphreys, *Letters From the Hon. David Humphreys* . . . , 10-13

¹⁸⁴ Chandos Michael Brown, *Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent*, 418

the classification of new animals. Humphreys tells us that, from the descriptive evidence, the sea serpent possesses “attributes of the serpent kind” but does not go so far as to assert, or to make others assert, that they think or believe they have seen a serpent.¹⁸⁵

Finally, Humphreys was aware of the social and cultural features that divided social classes in his day, and in the process of compiling his information, he talked to “women and children” as he “frequented the eastern side of Gloucester-Bay more than any other place.” He was trying, “without hesitation, to repeat what they said . . . in their own phraseology, viz. ‘that he seemed to them an awful-looking, shocking, great, black creature . . . with frightful, glaring eyes, nearly as big as the rim of a middling-sized tea-cup . . .’” Humphreys was also “perfectly sensible” of and mentioned specifically the “disjunction” between the language of the educated elite and that of the mariners and working people whose depositions were critical” to his work and that of the Linnaean Society of New England’s committee. The most significant feature of Nash’s accounts that indicates some sort of mis-translation or, in Chandos Michael Brown’s words, a distortion, is the identical phrasing used concerning the essential nature of the sea serpent, that it is a serpent. Whether or not it is Nash’s translation or a feature edited in afterwards, it seems to me that the assertions are crafted to make the descriptive evidence

¹⁸⁵ Humphreys, *Letters From the Hon. David Humphreys* . . . , 13, 14; Brown, *Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent*, 418;

square with the essential nature of the one piece of concrete evidence the committee could secure—the carcass.¹⁸⁶

On September 5, Humphreys wrote his second letter to clarify the description in the first. Although the best efforts for capturing the animal had been made, there was “little probability of his being taken alive; and not much more that he will ever be brought dead to the land . . .” In an almost defensive tone, Humphreys described the efforts to capture or kill the sea serpent more thoroughly than the newspapers of the period. The fishermen and whalers, he wrote, “with which Cape Ann and Marblehead abound, may doubtless be reckoned in the class of the most bold, enterprising and dexterous mariners in the world.” And, Humphreys reported, “upon confirmation . . . that this Serpent of the ocean” was seen in Gloucester Bay, they went to that place, first to see, and then “with the hope of having the glory of killing him,” for “more than 5000 dollars had been offered for the spoils of this Leviathan.” Among the measures taken to catch the sea serpent, boats, “properly equipped for offence and defence, were constantly patrolling the harbour . . . He never came within striking distance.” Hooks designed for catching sharks “*with still stronger apparatus*, baited with various kinds of fish and flesh” were set “in all directions,” and “nets were fixed almost all over the bay.” Two vessels from Marblehead, manned by experienced whalers, explored the bay with a collection of implements that included “swivels, guns, gags, and axes, to

¹⁸⁶ Humphreys, *Letters From the Hon. David Humphreys* . . ., 13, 14; Brown, *Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent*, 418

repel and slay him, in case of his attempting to come on board.” They never encountered the sea serpent.¹⁸⁷

Of the quality of the evidence he could produce, and in light of the futility of all the attempts to produce a specimen or carcass, Humphreys wrote “although facts are my sole object, I allow myself to repeat such reports and opinions of others, as do not seem to me incredible,” and so he concluded his second letter with “the aggregate result” of his interviews. The head and tail of the sea serpent, according to the composite picture Humphreys synthesized for him, were said to “resemble those of the common snake,” his color was “black,” his body was “the bigness of a flour barrel,” and his length “from sixty to one-hundred feet or more.”¹⁸⁸

Continuing his pursuit of the Sea Serpent, in his letter written from Boston, on October 2, 1817, Humphreys wrote jubilantly about the small carcass of the deformed black snake secured at Cape Ann; this specimen, he wrote, would “render the chain of proofs irrefragable by all the powers of scepticism.” Skepticism and ridicule, in Humphreys’ opinion, were the two elements of the sea serpent phenomenon that prevented the truth from coming to light. After his discussion of the men who had tried to capture or kill the sea serpent, Humphreys wrote contrastingly about his correspondence and the effusion of reports in and beyond the newspapers accompanying the phenomenon. “The short history of

¹⁸⁷ Humphreys, *Letters From the Hon. David Humphreys . . .*, 21-24

¹⁸⁸ Humphreys, *Letters From the Hon. David Humphreys . . .*, 29

unsuccessful attempts to take him . . . I flatter myself, will not be deemed superfluous, after so many fictitious and contradictory paragraphs have been printed, without being refuted, or explained in any satisfactory manner.” In the newspaper reports, he observed a “passion for hoaxing” that gave rise to “undue occasion for ridicule and credulity,” and a tendency among other writers to form conjectures about “the quarter from which he came” and “the cause of his coming to this coast.” These conjectures could only be resolved by the use of the imagination; they are the seeds of fiction or fantasy, not the stuff of science. Humphreys, contrariwise, committed himself to communicating realistically, for his main point in writing was first, to “prove the presence of this serpent of the ocean,” and second, to make the compilation of facts his “sole object.”¹⁸⁹

Humphreys’ most resonant complaint about the phenomenon concerns the parallel tracks of communication in sea serpent writing and the presence of so many hoaxes alongside so many honest accounts. Heuvelmans, writing in 1965, describes how he addressed this problem when he began to study sea serpents, about twelve years before writing *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*. “I thought I would find it very hard to distinguish the true reports from the false . . . the reports fall into two distinct categories: accounts that were obviously honest, sober in their tone and in the facts reported, usually confirmed by several independent witnesses . . . and [others] . . . that were obviously false, suspicious in tone, describing spectacular and dramatic events and usually contradicting themselves.”

¹⁸⁹ Humphreys, *Letters From the Hon. David Humphreys* . . . , 49, 27, 28

Humphreys understood that “Banks would have to weigh the relative merit of the evidence” and so he sent him several newspaper clippings along with the letters, a collection he characterized as containing the true, the false, the burlesque and the ludicrous. Heuvelmans comments also that in the autumn of 1817, as “the whole learned world took an excited interest” in the Linnaean Society’s work, “a whole series of hoaxes at the poor monster’s expense were perpetrated while it was hot news.” Hoaxes undermined the scientific inquiry in the sea serpent because without the use of critical methods that would be developed for research later in the nineteenth-century, they weakened the reliability of the only evidence for the sea serpent, descriptive evidence.¹⁹⁰

The recipient of Humphreys’ letters, Joseph Banks, (1743-1820), was made president of the Royal Society in 1778 a post he kept until his death, a founding member of the Wernerian Natural Society in Edinburgh in 1808, and a foreign member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1788. His fields of study were botany and the natural sciences generally. His greatest achievements were made on two exploring expeditions, the first by the ship *Niger* to Newfoundland and Labrador in 1766.¹⁹¹ By 1818, New Englanders were anxious to receive some answers from Banks and other European scientists about their sea serpent. In the

¹⁹⁰ Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 28;
Brown, “Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent,” 417;
Humphreys, *Letters from the Hon. David Humphreys . . .*, 41, 42;
Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 162

¹⁹¹ On this expedition, he documented 34 species of the Great Auk, which became extinct in 1844. The second was Captain Cook’s first voyage, a joint Royal Society and Royal Navy enterprise, aboard the *Endeavour* to Brazil, South America, Tahiti, and Australia in 1768-1771. On this voyage, Banks, in collaboration with two other scientists, made the first comprehensive collection of Australian flora.

wake of the Rich fiasco, a writer commented in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* on September 10, “why have we not been told what Sir J. Banks, what Cuvier, and the other naturalists of Europe have thought on the *whole* subject?”¹⁹² Banks sent only one answer across the Atlantic to Benjamin Silliman in 1820, who was then editor of the *American Journal of Science and the Arts*. Silliman described the letter as being in Banks’s “own hand,” but did not run it verbatim. Paraphrasing, Silliman wrote that Banks had expressed “full faith, in the existence of our Serpent of the Sea . . . and he is grateful for every new communication I have given him on the subject . . .”¹⁹³ Like Peck, despite his eminence, Banks was too old to have contributed more than a nod up or down to the evidence and the possibility of the sea serpent’s existence. He could bring only the weight of his authority and some reflection in light of long experience to the sea serpent inquiry.

Among the scientists who reasoned from descriptive evidence, Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, (1783-1840), is the most enigmatic and original in his contribution to the sea serpent inquiry. He was born in Constantinople, the son of a French merchant from Marseille, and educated mostly by private tutors as “his mother shunted the children between France and Italy during the French Revolution.” In 1802, he made his first journey to the United States, where he was apprenticed to the Clifford Brothers, who were Philadelphia merchants. He maintained a long association with John D. Clifford, who was his patron in Kentucky

¹⁹² *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 10 Sept. 1818

¹⁹³ Benjamin Silliman, “Letter to the Editor, dated Boston, April 8, 1820,” in *American Journal of Science and the Arts*, II 2, (Nov. 1820): 164; Quoted in Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 24

at the time he wrote his “Dissertation on Water Snakes.” He spent two-and-a-half years in the apprenticeship, and explored “the countryside making botanical collections.” He returned to Europe and published a book in 1810 on Sicilian natural history, which “set the pattern for all of his subsequent scientific publications—the classification and description of new species of plants and animals.”¹⁹⁴

As stated before, Rafinesque often relied on descriptive evidence in his taxonomic endeavors, and this practice raised the animosity American naturalists, because they viewed his work as less than worthy of scientific credit as a result.¹⁹⁵ American naturalists also objected to Rafinesque’s use of a “natural system,” derived from a French schema of grouping plants according to morphological characteristics; Rafinesque’s American peers preferred the use of the Linnaean “artificial system” based on the number, union, and length of stamens for classes and the number of styles to determine the order of flowering plants.¹⁹⁶ In zoological terms, as the artificial system “tended to group animals on the basis of single characteristic,” the natural system, took in a range of the subject’s features

¹⁹⁴ Charles Boewe, “Rafinesque, Constantine Samuel,” *American National Biography Online*, Aug. 2012

¹⁹⁵ Charles Boewe, “Rafinesque, Constantine Samuel,” *American National Biography Online*, Aug. 2012; Francis W. Pennell, “Life and Work of Rafinesque,” in *Profiles of Rafinesque*, Charles Boewe, ed. (Knoxville, TN: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2003): 9

¹⁹⁶ Charles Boewe, “Rafinesque, Constantine Samuel,” *American National Biography Online*, Aug. 2012; Francis W. Pennell, “Life and Work of Rafinesque,” *Profiles of Rafinesque*, 8

to determine its classification and relationship to other creatures.¹⁹⁷ In spite of the preference for the Linnaean system in the U.S., the method peculiar to Rafinesque “prevailed by the middle of the nineteenth-century.”¹⁹⁸ Though most of Rafinesque’s work was ignored in his own lifetime, he was rehabilitated in the mid-twentieth-century when botanists acknowledged “most of Rafinesque’s 6,700 Latin plant names had been validly published according to rules since adopted by the botanists themselves.”¹⁹⁹ In *The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin cited Rafinesque as “one of only three American naturalists who had had the foresight to appreciate that ‘species undergo modification.’”²⁰⁰

Rafinesque’s use of description was refined by experience, and with it, he classified “sponges, insects, crustacean, fishes serpents and mammals,” as he “ransacked works of travel for animals not yet characterized by science.”²⁰¹ His “Dissertation on Water Snakes, Sea Snakes, and Sea Serpents,” 1819, emerged as one of several short dissertations from his great western tour of Pittsburgh, Ohio and Kentucky, and the Falls of Ohio, an effusion that was part of the most prolific period of his career, between 1817 and 1820.²⁰²

¹⁹⁷ Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid, and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination*, (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard U P, 1997): 26

¹⁹⁸ Charles Boewe, “Rafinesque, Constantine Samuel,” *American National Biography Online*, Aug. 2012;

Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, 26-7

¹⁹⁹ Charles Boewe, “Rafinesque, Constantine Samuel,” *American National Biography Online*, Aug. 2012

²⁰⁰ Charles Boewe, “Rafinesque, Constantine Samuel,” *American National Biography Online*, Aug. 2012

²⁰¹ Francis W. Pennell, “Life and Work of Rafinesque,” *Profiles of Rafinesque*, 9

²⁰² Francis W. Pennell, “Life and Work of Rafinesque,” *Profiles of Rafinesque*, 13-16

In the "Dissertation," Rafinesque described confronting Sea Serpent reports as a conglomeration of rational and irrational statements. "Whenever a singular phaenomenon . . . happens to be observed in the United States, whether spots in the sun, huge fossil bones, or serpents, a crowd of superficial writers hasten to offer us . . . their own ideas and conjectures on the subject" and these are "wild, incorrect or ridiculous."²⁰³ Writers unschooled in "the writings of Herschel, LaPlace, Cuvier or Pinkerton, &c" were like "a group of children attempting to reason and argue on the rising of the sun, an eclipse of the moon, on the oeconomy of bees, or on the structure of a whale, without asking any previous questions of their parents . . ."²⁰⁴ Texts that contributed to the non-scientific nationalist and natural historical discourse unique to the United States, Rafinesque implied, discouraged sea serpent inquiry in the scientific community and in, ultimately, in the public mind, by rendering the phenomenon "contemptible," in the eyes of the "vulgar . . . while it would otherwise become deeply interesting . . ."²⁰⁵ Furthermore, should the "crude speculations" become known in Europe, "they will certainly afford very unfavourable specimens of our knowledge and attainments in science." Rafinesque

²⁰³ Constantine S. Rafinesque. "Art. LXI. Dissertation On Water Snakes, Sea Snakes, and Sea Serpents," *Philosophical Magazine and Journal*, LIV, (July-Dec. 1819): 361-367
<http://books.google.com/books?id=ajcwAAAAIAAJ&lpg=PA193&ots=e4dCRGrkMc&dq=Philosophical%20magazine%20a%20journal%20of%20theoretical%2C%20experimental%20volume%2054&pg=PA193#v=onepage&q=rafinesque%20&f=false> Google Books, 8-2012

²⁰⁴ Rafinesque, "Dissertation on Water Snakes . . .," *Philosophical Magazine and Journal*, 361

²⁰⁵ Rafinesque, "Dissertation on Water Snakes . . .," *Philosophical Magazine and Journal*, 361

understood already, that the Sea Serpent had become more resonant as an object of culture than as a natural curiosity or scientific inquiry.²⁰⁶

By the time he wrote those remarks, Rafinesque was, for all his idiosyncrasies, recognized as a learned man, for by then he had, along with Samuel L. Mitchill, helped to found the New York Lyceum of Natural History. In his “Dissertation,” Rafinesque refers repeatedly to descriptive evidence and the observers who provide it. “The ancients gave the name of Water Snakes and Sea Snakes to many fishes of the eel tribe,” he observed that though they resembled each other, “they [eels] differ materially on examination by having fins and gills, and neither lungs nor scales.” He refers to a book, titled *Snakes of the Coast of Coromandel*, but more correctly known as *An Account of the Indian Serpents Collected on the Coast of Coromandel*, 1796, by Dr. Patrick Russell, a Scottish surgeon and naturalist. Russell was, according to Rafinesque, the first writer to establish the existence of “Real Water Snakes and Sea Snakes.” The authorities to which he refers in tracing the history of the genera of water snakes are all extraordinarily learned. For example, Johann Gottlob Theaenus Schneider, 1750-1822, was a classicist who specialized in the scientific writing of ancient authors, and became authoritative in the taxonomy of fishes when he edited and re-published a much older catalogue of fishes in 1801. He refers also to the herpetological classifications of English naturalist and zoologist George Shaw, 1751-1813, to the work of Pierre Andre Latreille, 1762-1833, and that of Francois Marie

²⁰⁶ Rafinesque, “Dissertation on Water Snakes . . .,” *Philosophical Magazine and Journal*, 361

Daudin, 1774-1804. Shaw, Latreille, and Daudin divided the “water snakes” into four different genera, and identified “about fourteen species” within them.²⁰⁷

There is nothing unusual about a scientist referring to the work of other scientists, but where Rafinesque breaks with most of the scientific writing about sea serpents is in asserting that “ten more [types of sea snakes] are noticed in the travels of [Francois] Peron to Australia or New Holland” and “many others appear to have been perceived by former travellers . . . [and] a great variety are known to sailors.”²⁰⁸ The “travels of Peron” is actually a reference to a book-length work chronicling the travels of Francois Peron, 1775-1810, published in English, in London, as *A Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Hemisphere Performed by Order of the Emperor Napoleon, During the Years 1801, 1802, 1803 and 1804*, 1809.

The first objective of Rafinesque’s “Dissertation On Water Snakes” was to classify the ten water snakes described in Peron’s published narrative. To accomplish this, Rafinesque used his own knowledge as an external frame of reference, against and around which he could evaluate the narrative evidence. Using the elements of each narrative, Rafinesque, made “a concise account . . . which may facilitate their future observations . . .” and classified all ten into one family, Platuria, one genus, *Ophinctes*, and then ten different species.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ Rafinesque, “Dissertation on Water Snakes . . .,” *Philosophical Magazine and Journal*, 361-2

²⁰⁸ Rafinesque, “Dissertation on Water Snakes . . .,” *Philosophical Magazine and Journal*, 362

²⁰⁹ Rafinesque, “Dissertation on Water Snakes . . .,” *Philosophical Magazine and Journal*, 362

The second objective of the “Dissertation” was to classify “four different animals . . . lately observed by Americans, and named Sea Serpents . . .”²¹⁰ Though Rafinesque could have been informed of the Stronsa Animal, or could have gained access to the *Scoliophis Atlanticus* preserved by the Linnaean Society, and could have reasoned or concluded from something concrete, he did not. He recognized the limits of the narrative evidence, and wisely kept whatever explanations he made within those limits. From American accounts written between 1815 and 1819, among the four classes of creatures, the one he called the Massachusetts Sea Serpent was the only one that seemed to be a sea serpent, he classified the second as a fish and the last two as “doubtful.”²¹¹

Rafinesque is believed to have based his discussion of the “Massachusetts Sea Serpent” “on the strength of no more information than had reached the New York papers . . .”²¹² He catalogued the animal’s features according to consistent features of the reports, but could not decide on a classification for the creature. At first, he proposed “to call it *Pelamis megophias*, which means Great Sea Snake Pelamis” but also considered that “it might be a peculiar genus, which the long, equal scales seem to indicate, and which a closer examination might have decided . . . the name of *Megophias monstrosus* might have been appropriated to it.” Note that Rafinesque considers, and even he proposes, but, like Peck and Agassiz, he does not conclude anything.

²¹⁰ Rafinesque, “Dissertation on Water Snakes . . .,” *Philosophical Magazine and Journal*, 363-4

²¹¹ Rafinesque, “Dissertation on Water Snakes . . .,” *Philosophical Magazine and Journal*, 364

²¹² Brown, “Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent,” *American Quarterly*, 423

Rafinesque's inquiry, with its inconclusive assertions, in spite of the limitations of the evidence from which they are drawn, suggests several more avenues of inquiry. His "Dissertation on Water Snakes" Heuvelmans argues, was "an important step in our knowledge of the great sea serpent," because "an established naturalist . . . realized that *all* the sea monsters described as sea-serpents were not necessarily true serpents."²¹³ In 1965, Bernard Heuvelmans gave a tribute to the man he called the sea serpent's greatest sponsor, in concluding that the name Rafinesque gave to the sea serpent of New England, as depicted in the news accounts, *Megophias monstrosus* Rafinesque, is this animal's designation, according "to the conventions of zoological nomenclature . . . until and unless we find there has been a mistake."²¹⁴ Chondos Michael Brown lauds Rafinesque's monitory messages about European interpretation of the writing of unlearned Americans on the sea serpent,²¹⁵ "in this conclusion, if not in his classification of the serpent, he was absolutely correct."²¹⁶

One of Rafinesque's associates in New York City was Samuel Latham Mitchill, (1764-1831). Like Rafinesque, Mitchill took the narrative evidence of the sea serpent seriously, but took his analysis of it in a fascinating, non-scientific direction—an approach worthy of a polymath. Like William Bentley, the diarist in Salem, Mitchill lived with the objective of learning everything about everything in the world. "Once described as a 'chaos of knowledge,' Mitchill was generally more

²¹³ Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 157

²¹⁴ Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 160

²¹⁵ Ante, page 52, note 165

²¹⁶ Brown, "Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent," 424

admired for his encyclopedic breadth of understanding than for much originality of thought.”²¹⁷ The discussion of Mitchill’s thinking on the sea serpent will show some of the depth in his understanding accompanying that breadth. His higher education began between 1781 and 1783, when he was apprenticed to a Dr. Samuel Bard in New York City, and concluded when he was graduated with honors from the University of Edinburgh in 1786 with a degree in medicine.

In 1797, Mitchill was secretary of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, and in the same year, was elected president of the Society for the Promotion of Agricultural Arts and Manufactures of New York. Between 1804 and 1809, he served in the U.S. Senate representing New York as a Jeffersonian Republican. In 1815, he published his most significant zoological work, the *Fishes of New York*, “a book recognized by contemporary observers as a major contribution to ichthyology.”²¹⁸ Mitchill and Rafinesque both helped found the Lyceum of Natural History in 1817, later called the New York Academy of Sciences. The institution became “one of the most important in the New World,” because of the collection its members built, and “because, in its museum phase, it grew into the American Museum of Natural History.”²¹⁹

By the early nineteenth-century, two rival systems of classification were used by American scientists, the older Linnaean system and the one based on

²¹⁷ Kier B. Sterling. “Mitchill, Samuel Latham,” <http://www.anb.org/articles/13/13-01154.html>, *American National Biography Online*, 7-2012

²¹⁸ Kier B. Sterling. “Mitchill, Samuel Latham,” *American National Biography Online*, 7-2012

²¹⁹ Courtney Hall, *A Scientist in the Early Republic, Samuel Latham Mitchill, 1764-1831*, (New York: Columbia U P, 1934): 127

French prototypes that would eventually be adopted. In the case of the New England sea serpent, we have seen for ourselves that the creature of the reports, spoken, written, and printed between 1800 and 1825, by 1819, had been given two binomial names, indicating two possible taxonomic designations, and the Linnaean Society's *Scoliophis Atlanticus* and Rafinesque's *Megophias monstrosus*. Samuel Mitchill's letter, the reply to John Travis that began this chapter, took note of the large number of binomial designations for sea snakes that already existed by 1817.²²⁰

"Show me a fin, and I will point out the fish," Mitchill often boasted to his students of natural history at Columbia College.²²¹ His encyclopedic knowledge set him on solid ground in his boast, but Mitchill did not dismiss descriptive or narrative evidence entirely, and was not averse to using it in his classification process. For instance, on July 22, 1817, the *Boston Recorder* carried a story about a "communication" Mitchill gave "in the setting of the New York Historical Society" on May 6 of that year, the subject of which was the "enormous sea monster . . . the eight-armed cuttle-fish . . ." ²²² Mitchill was recapitulating "evidences which he had before published" and the local angle was Mitchill's use of "the following facts, derived from Capt. Fanning . . ." ²²³ The remainder of the article was an extract from

²²⁰ Ante, 1

²²¹ Quoted in Burnett, *Trying Leviathan*, 2

²²² "The Kraken, or, Sea-Monster," *Boston Recorder*, 22 Jul. 1817; "THE KRAKEN—or Sea Monster—", *The National Register, A Weekly Paper, Containing a Series of the Important Public Documents . . .*, [Washington, DC] 4 5, (Aug. 1817): 78, Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*.

²²³ *Boston Recorder*, "The Kraken, or, Sea-Monster," 22 Jul. 1817

Captain Edmund Fanning, from the journal, or log, of the ship *Volunteer* in the Atlantic Ocean and sailing toward Tierra Del Fuego. The account told the crew's encounter with a creature that looked like a rock, and then started moving, "its impulse was spontaneous . . . and not derived from currents of water or air . . . no determinate judgment of his bulk, figure, or manner of swimming could be formed, partly by reason of his vastness, partly because of his concealment under water."²²⁴

The first paragraph of the article does not tell us specifically that Mitchill recapitulated his "evidences" based on Fanning's account. Fanning's account is fully given, and the implication is not unreasonable, that Mitchill was using the narrative to help shape his thinking process in the inquiry concerning the eight-armed cuttlefish.

In 1828 and 1829, Mitchill gave one lecture at the New York Lyceum and wrote one widely circulated article, the "History of Sea-Serpentism," in which he uses sea-serpentism in the same as way I use "sea serpent phenomenon" to denote the human and cultural interaction with the sea serpent. One must differentiate, as Mitchill did, between the "-ism" and the "-ology," the first was the harbor of movements, ideologies and beliefs, revolutionary or not, and the second was the harbor of study; he made the sea serpent into an ism to humanize the phenomenon, because the "monster of the deep" was more the creature of its observers than of the sea.²²⁵ The discussion following is an overview of the "History

²²⁴ *Boston Recorder*, "The Kraken, or, Sea-Monster," 22 Jul. 1817

²²⁵ Samuel L. Mitchill. "Art. IX., History of Sea-Serpentism, from Sanuel L. Mitchill's summary of the Progress of Natural Natural Science within our United States . . . read before the New-York Lyceum

of Sea Serpentism,” published first by Benjamin Silliman in the *American Journal of Science and Arts*, January, 1829, that is followed by a textual analysis and a critique of the contemporary and historical responses to it.

The “History of Sea Serpentism” has two parts, the first is an extended narrative of Mitchill’s involvement in the phenomenon, and the second is an itemized list of “tales” or a series of events Mitchill found significant for anyone planning to write a history of sea-serpentism. The sea serpent seen off coastal New England, was unworthy of scientific notice, and the only thing making the sea serpent worthy of a lecture is that “something imagined, or so called, had been frequently been presented for public consideration . . .” And here, Mitchill asserts the literary nature of the sea serpent phenomenon, for even though he does not name just who has been presenting the imagined something for public consideration, he does note that “paragraphs and statements in the newspapers and journals . . . from time to time, attract the attention of their readers.”²²⁶

He elaborates on the literary incursion into the sea serpent inquiry when he tells us that David Humphreys visited him later in the autumn of 1817, and requested him to listen to “a manuscript.” Humphreys was “highly delighted with his success” in making a comprehensive collection of sea serpent narratives, but, not content to collect sea serpent narrative evidence as a series of notes, Humphreys had afterward “reduced his researches into the form of letters and

at a succession of sittings during October, 1828.—No. 35. THE SEA SERPENT,” *American Journal of Science and Arts*, 15 2, (Jan 2, 1829): 351-356, Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*.

²²⁶ Mitchill, “History of Sea-Serpentism,” *American Journal of Science and Arts*, 351

addressed to Sir Joseph Banks.” Mitchill is telling us that when Humphreys turned the information in his notes into letters, editing them this way and that, he undermined its usefulness in a truly open inquiry. Humphreys, using a kind of literary alchemy, turned pieces of evidence into a work of art, material for the practice of a different discourse altogether. Mitchill stated further that he thought it was Humphreys’ intention to “take the lead of the Linnaean Society, and to acquire the honor and glory of making the wonderful intelligence known first to the scavans of Europe.” Mitchill also found that Humphreys “considered himself right in the investigation,” and Mitchill, for his part, decided to keep his silence. Mitchill also found himself acting as an intermediary between an author and the publisher when Humphreys asked him to take the manuscript of the letters, and then to engage a bookseller “to cause it to be put to press without delay.” Mitchill made the contract on behalf of Humphreys, and directed that the proof sheets be sent to Humphreys in New Haven. Of the interview and request, Mitchill commented that by his silence, “I had a lucky escape from an association with the extraordinary creature.”²²⁷

Mitchill’s “extraordinary creature” was never a living organism for Mitchill, but the object of art and literature, a cultural phenomenon. He differentiated sharply between the sea serpent of New England as he had humanized and the “four true sea serpents,” that his “navigating friends had brought . . . from the Gulf of Mexico and the Chinese Sea.” Soon after the interview with Humphreys,

²²⁷ Mitchill, “History of Sea-Serpentism,” *American Journal of Science and Arts*, 351-3

someone brought the preserved specimen the Linnaean Society committee had named *Scoliophis Atlanticus* to Mitchill for examination. He concluded “. . . it had been a native of the land, (apparently a *coluber*,) and had, of course, no pretension to claim kindred with its pretended parent of the ocean.” Mitchill does not identify who brought the specimen to him, and after writing the creature’s Linnaean genus name, characterizes the small snake in absurd terms as the supposed prince of a pretender, a characterization which, in its confusion of identities, is worthy of a Shakespearean comedy.²²⁸

The sea serpent of Mitchill’s understanding never swam, fished, sported or played in the bays of New England or Long Island, New York. Instead, the “alleged monster of the deep first haunted the coast of Massachusetts, and frightened more particularly the neighborhood of Gloucester . . .” From the observations, written evidence accumulated, and “these were so considerable and imposing,” that the Committee of the Linnaean Society published its *Report*, whose argument Mitchill cleverly inverted, writing that “the figure of the enormous reptile” was classified as *Scoliophis Atlanticus*. Mitchill observed that since neither fishermen nor naturalists could secure the sea serpent, “it was concluded to fortify the story by oaths. . . . And, as far as swearing went, such solemn declarations presented a strong case.” The main idea in Mitchill’s essay was always that the people of New England and New York believed they had seen a sea serpent, but truly, they had not seen a sea serpent at all. The sworn statement was true in that it reflected the subjective

²²⁸ Mitchill, “History of Sea-Serpentism,” *American Journal of Science and Arts*, 352-3

experience of the person making it, but not objectively true in the content it related.²²⁹

He concludes his brief narrative with a literary proposal written in the language of the tall tale, that a he should write a history of sea-serpentism, calling it “a memorable part of the sayings and doings in this enlightened age and country.” He posits that there is no limit to creative power, but, as a scientist, he reserves it for God, writing, “the almighty being could make a water-snake as easily as a fish . . . such an animal might be a big as a *Kraken*,” and as small as the “*Stickelback*.” In Mitchill’s estimation, the sea serpent is not the same kind of creation as the water snake or the fish, because it has no objective reality. Sea serpentism, or the sea serpent phenomenon, reflects the complex creative faculty not of God, but of the human mind. In the “tales,” Mitchill proposes to review some “legends of the times,” where he finds “such a propensity towards the strange and the marvellous, that the men of the present day show a credulity . . . resembling that of the remote ages, when the terraqueous globe was peopled with gorgons, mermaids, chimeras, hydras, dragons, and all the monsters of fabulous zoology.”²³⁰

One might think that Captain Richard Rich, in his refusal to wonder at what he saw, would be a fellow traveler with the skeptic Samuel L. Mitchill, but the two are divergent in their background, knowledge and, above all, their application of original thinking to the problem. Mitchill, unlike Rich, the Linnaean Society

²²⁹ Mitchill, “History of Sea-Serpentism,” *American Journal of Science and Arts*, 352

²³⁰ Mitchill, “History of Sea-Serpentism,” *American Journal of Science and Arts*, 353

Committee, or Lyell, never tried to pass the sea serpent off as a perceptual trick. He explained it in terms that reached well beyond the developing discourses of maritime and biological science. Mitchill's arguments that the sea serpent himself is a representation, a metaphor connected to humanity's obscure past and a denizen of the world of myth, and that the sighting narrative might be written, even in elevated and highly believable language, as allegory, demonstrates an deep insight almost a century before its time.

The breadth of Mitchill's knowledge helps to explain the profundity of his response to the sea serpent phenomenon. While his best-known work was the *Fishes of New York*, 1815, he also wrote *A Discourse on the State and Prospects of American Literature*, 1821, which was first delivered as a lecture to the New York Alpha of the Phi Beta Kappa society in Schenectady, New York. Mitchill's perspective provoked two contemporary responses, the first in a note written by Benjamin Silliman at the bottom of the first page of the essay itself, and the second from the *National Aegis* in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Silliman tried to distance his own perspective from that of Mitchill by pointing out that he had published, in the second volume of the *American Journal of Science and Arts*, the "Remarks by Bigelow on the Sea Serpent," one of the sources for this chapter. Silliman argues that he does not share Mitchill's skepticism because, referring to Bigelow's compilation, he does not believe the

accounts of “Captain Little of the Boston frigate, of Marshal Prince and family, and of Mr. Cabot, can be set aside.”²³¹

In his compilation of accounts and history of the sea serpent phenomenon in early nineteenth-century New England, Bernard Heuvelmans observed that between 1815 and 1827, sea serpent reports made on the east coast of the United States were so consistent in their elements “as to be almost monotonous.” He commented that after 1827, most of the public were “disillusioned by various hoaxes and the failure to catch the beast,” and consequently, they found it easier to disbelieve “the whole thing.” Mitchill’s “History of Sea-Serpentism” reflects this state of mind, and adds to it by relating “all the hoaxes” and passing over in silence “all the reports that argued for the beast’s existence . . .” Heuvelmans commented powerfully on Mitchill’s cautiously-worded conclusion that “after all these mistakes, deceptions, and wilful [sic] perversions . . . every person . . . may admit that the gambols of porpoises, the slow motions of basking sharks . . . may have given rise to those parts of the narrations . . .” As Mitchill’s conclusion was based on so little evidence, Heuvelmans characterized it as ultimately disingenuous.²³²

In spite of the ironic content of the “History of Sea-Serpentism,” it is vital to remember that Mitchill’s subject was not the existence of the sea serpent itself, he was trying to explain the body of narrative evidence alone, and was concerned with the thoughts and imagination of the observers, individually and collectively. For

²³¹ Mitchill, *n*, “History of Sea-Serpentism,” *American Journal of Science and Arts*, 351

²³² Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents*, 173;

Mitchill, “History of Sea-Serpentism,” *American Journal of Science and Arts*, 356

him, the narratives, if the object they contained did not exist, had to contain another, non-scientific kind of truth about their authors, human history, and creativity. The essay can be likened to a door he was opening for others to go through in order to understand the human side of the phenomenon more deeply.

In anatomizing the sea serpent between 1800 and 1850, scientific observers came to a cluster of alternative ways to define the creature, either as a nondescript, a known animal that has been mistaken for an unknown one, or, perhaps, a set of circumstances like the wake of a larger aquatic animal or line of them swimming in calm water. Still, the movement of the inquiry in each of these discussions, regardless of the starting point, has gone consistently from an analysis of the object, to an analysis of the observer, from the experience of the sea serpent, to the motives and capacities of the human being who tells his story. American scientists catalogued wonders and curiosities, but they did not subject such things to serious scientific inquiry. They sidelined the sea serpent inquiry, other wonders, and curiosities, because even though American scientists catalogued and remained interested in curiosities and wonders, they “pushed curiosities to the margins of natural history practice . . . and concerned themselves with representative . . . objects illustrative of larger groupings.”²³³

In contrast to the sea serpent, the numbers of reports of mermaids in the nineteenth-century “were small and elusive,” and scientists never apprehended this particular body of descriptive evidence as seriously as that of the sea serpent. As

²³³ Andrew Lewis, *Democracy of Facts*, 63

we have seen, as in the case of mermaids, there was no concrete evidence of the existence of sea serpents, and Ritvo asserts correctly that they inhabited “the tradition composed of the accumulated reports of eyewitnesses and the assertions of experts based on those reports.” Every assessment of the available evidence invariably shifted the focus of every scientific inquiry back from the object and toward the observer, and thus brought up more questions about the sea serpent phenomenon than the sea serpent itself. Sea serpents, because they existed “in the realm of imagination and will and desire,” gave scientists and literary people alike a platform, “a blank text” not just for inscribing their understanding of animals, nor just for critiquing the “structures imposed by self-constituted expertise,” as Ritvo has argued. The next two chapters will not concern themselves with the existence of the Sea Serpent of New England as a question to be answered. Instead, they will discuss the manner of his existence in New England and American culture of the first half of the nineteenth-century, viewing the creature as medium for a conflicted period in New England’s history, the region’s connection with ocean commerce, and finally, both regional and national identity in the Antebellum and mid-nineteenth-century.²³⁴

²³⁴ Ritvo, *Platypus and the Mermaid*, 186

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICIZING THE SEA SERPENT

While learned observers on both sides of the Atlantic were dismissing the New England Sea Serpent in order to define their objects of study, authority and epistemology, laymen, as American literary practitioners, were far from finished with the creature. They had right in front of their eyes a store of resources in the sighting narratives that gave them a literary subject peculiar to the American coast, with peculiar mythological, scriptural, visceral and historical associations that could be fairly characterized as sublime; and they did not allow the Sea Serpent to pass away half-written into the history of creative literary endeavors.

This chapter discusses Sea Serpent literature in the context of New England, and their stance in relation to the events of the first fifteen years of the nineteenth-century. It uses the concepts of association, media, the sublime and comic in the literature of that region between 1817 and 1825 to show how its writers, particularly those living on the coast, dealt with residual anxieties about the period of Jeffersonian democracy, Atlantic tensions, and war in their immediate aftermath. Association is an ancient idea, discussions of it can be found in the writing of Aristotle and Plato; but for the purposes of this study, and to elucidate the concept's historical context, I intend to use the definition articulated by Robert E. Streeter in 1945, in an essay that discussed associationism and American literature of the Early Republic by way of the work of several contributors to the *North*

American Review between the years 1815 and 1825. "The doctrine of associationism stemmed from the observed fact that ideas introduced into the mind at the same time or place, or related to each other through similarity, dissimilarity, cause-and-effect, recall each other in a train of thought."²³⁵

By way of associations, the literature of the Sea Serpent phenomenon interacted with the first fifteen years of the nineteenth-century in the collective memory of New Englanders. In that interval, a rift became perceptible between the interests of New England and the United States; among the events that articulated it were the Louisiana Purchase, the American reaction to the Scott Case of 1805-6, the Embargo of 1807-9, and the War of 1812. In 1817, these lifted their heads out of the sea of time in the essays, poetry, and literary fragments that took the Sea Serpent as their subject.

In July, 1818, "Samuel Simpleton," the editor of *The Idiot*, ran a poem by an author called "Leviathan." It was a brief, rough-and-tumble self-introduction of the Sea Serpent titled, as most Sea Serpent articles were, "The SEA SERPENT."

"Know ye, who live from East to West,
That I with sovereign pow'r am blest,
To rule the Seas alone;
Here I assert my *name* and right,
'Leviathan' of wondrous might;

²³⁵ Robert E. Streeter, "Association Psychology and Literary Nationalism in the North American Review, 1815-1825," in *American Literature*, 17 3, (Nov. 1945), 243

And make my greatness known.”²³⁶

If sea serpents inhabit the “realm of imagination . . . will and desire,” as Harriet Ritvo tells us, then the way in which New Englanders filled in that blank text is of interest to the purpose of understanding literary development, apprehension of the unknown and their creation of a symbol that would remain versatile and relevant in print for almost thirty-five years. In short, the literary, artistic, and dramatic discourses of the Sea Serpent became just as prominent in the phenomenon as the reports and more productive over the course of time than the lay discourse of science which Andrew J. Lewis called the “democracy of facts.” All of the sources discussed in this chapter are literary, some fragmentary and others undeveloped, and yet these shortcomings did not keep them off the printed page. Among them are reports, facetious and fictional reports, poems, essays, and letters. All of them take the Sea Serpent as their subject of discussion. None has been employed by historians of the history, literary or otherwise, of the Early Republic, Jacksonian, or Antebellum eras, and, from this perspective, this study and this particular chapter are innovative.

Sea Serpent reports were limited by their function in fact creation; they employed mostly objective descriptive language and emphasized the credibility of the observer, reporter and editor. The literary and cultural response to the Sea Serpent phenomenon may be understood as an extension of the lay and scientific

²³⁶ Leviathan, “The SEA SERPENT,” *The Idiot*, 11 July 1818

inquiries because it began with the same questions, does the Sea Serpent exist.

What kind of Sea Serpent is he? Natural history, as carried on by scientific and non-scientific writers, did not answer the questions of his “shape, dimensions and character.” However, in literature, art and drama, these and other questions, even if put to the Sea Serpent himself, could be answered.

The Sea Serpent was a medium, that is, a cultural object that can contain things, in which New Englanders creatively contained residual anxieties springing from historical traumas specific to the region; these were the Republican ascendancy in 1801, the dynamic of commercial expansion and frustration in the conflicted Atlantic world, and finally, the culmination of these problems in the War of 1812. This chapter and the next will emphasize the literary uses of the Sea Serpent, as drawn from collective memory, and as used in comments on the past and present, liberty and power, as these were apprehended, desired, and dreaded in New England.

Here, the Sea Serpent is a medium according to that definition developed by Marshall McLuhan, (1911-1980), a prominent, mid-twentieth-century theorist of communication, most of whose educational background was in literary studies. He defined a medium most broadly as “any extension of ourselves . . .,” and his simplest example of a medium was the electric light. The electric light, he wrote, is “pure information” because it is a “medium without a message . . .” It communicates what it illuminates, and so as a medium, it contains other mediums,

such as signs, open books, etc. and so the content of one medium is another medium. Extending the idea, he wrote further that writing contains speech, print contains writing, and the telegraph contained print. In his idea of mediumship, McLuhan is describing phenomena of history as much as technology.²³⁷

His view of the human and social consequences of media in the nineteenth-century described the Industrial Revolution, in which the Medieval and Early Modern craftsman's work processes were transformed by "fragmentary and mechanical" technologies that restructured "human work and association." Literacy in particular, introduced a significant period in time between the action of the communicator and the reaction of his receiver.²³⁸

This period between action and reaction helps to understand McLuhan's distinction between hot and cold forms of media. The hot medium "extends one single sense in high definition," and is not subject to elaboration among the receivers of its message. The "cold medium" functions in lower definition, provides less information, and by its limitations prompts the auditor, receiver, or viewer to elaborate the communication experience. One example of each of these phenomena from the early twentieth-century should make them clear. President Calvin Coolidge, in his persistent laconicism, had a public persona "so lacking in any articulation of data" that journalists were compelled to create "an image of him for

²³⁷ Marshall McLuhan. "Chapter 1, The Medium is the Message," *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1st MIT Press Edition, (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1994), 7, 8

²³⁸ Marshall McLuhan. "Chapter 1, The Medium is the Message," *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1-4

the public,” and this image was summed up in one word, cool. Conversely, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a “hot press agent . . . [and] rival of the newspaper medium,” who “delighted in scoring off the press in the hot medium of radio.”²³⁹

In its literary dimensions, the Sea Serpent phenomenon, through correspondence and reports, and through Andrew Lewis’s democracy of facts, begins as a hot medium. This and the proceeding chapter will show just how the hot medium of the Sea Serpent report cools down and lends itself to elaboration and various images and shades of meaning, in the written word, on canvas or on the stage.

The poetry and fiction that takes the Sea Serpent as its subject shows an inter-relationship between the sublime and comic, and the following discussion will explain it, first by exploring the various historical definitions of sublimity and then relate the concept as it evolved by 1790 to the basic premises about humor in the work of Paul Lewis titled *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature*, 1989.

Two prominent eighteenth-century intellectuals, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, treated of the sublime in literature and nature philosophically. In 1757, Edmund Burke defined it in terms of the object of expression, and then, Immanuel Kant, in 1790, defined it in terms of the individual, emotion, and perspective.

²³⁹ Marshall McLuhan. “Chapter 1, The Medium is the Message,” *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 22-25, 29

The Burkean paradigm of literary sublimity explains why the writing about the Sea Serpent is humorous and light-hearted, in spite of the alarm the creature caused in several 1817 sighting accounts. The humorous response is explicable in two ways, first, in terms of the relationship between the sublime, fear, the incongruous, and the construction of humor as observed by Paul Lewis. The second is the phenomenon explained in terms of Marshall McLuhan's hot medium of the Sea Serpent report as it cools down in the culture of New England, the United States, and the Anglo-American Atlantic. It also explains the use of the Sea Serpent as an American metaphor of power, for figuring the British Empire and even U.S. aggression in the creation of an "empire of liberty."

In Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*, the first section states that curiosity, the most immediate and ephemeral human response to the novel, is "whatever desire we have for, and whatever pleasure we take in novelty."²⁴⁰ While the sighting narratives of the first chapter are full of details, their focus is on the "Aquatick Novelty," the object, its qualities and its movements. Rarely do they take account of an observer's state of mind, yet we shall see that the observer or observers were not always circumscribed. A heightened apprehension, which can mean both fear, an alertness, and a desire to observe closely and remember clearly, can be implied from the sighting narratives and their use in fact creation. In the weeks of September, 1817, the Sea Serpent cooled as a medium into more literary forms,

²⁴⁰ Edmund S. Burke, 1.1, "Novelty," *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford U P, 1990, 1998), 29

and it is here that one can perceive the dynamic Burke described in his treatise, a response taking in both dimensions of curiosity about the novel—desire and pleasure.

Immanuel Kant's discussion of the "Analytic of the Sublime" centered not on the quality of objects, but on individual consciousness and experience in the Second Book of his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 1790. The Beautiful and Sublime "agree" because "both please in themselves," they are both aesthetic experiences common to all people. Unlike the Beautiful, the Sublime is not dependent on the form of an object, and, while beauty in nature "brings with it a purposiveness in its form by which the object seems to be, as it were, pre-adapted to our Judgment, and thus constitutes in itself an object of satisfaction . . ." The beautiful object in nature is appropriate in its form, and so it is, according to human judgment, congruous with its surroundings in human perception. The Sublime object, however, in its form, "may appear . . . to violate purpose in respect of the Judgment, to be unsuited to our presentative faculty; and, as it were, to do violence to the Imagination . . ." The representation of a sublime object singularly "determines the mind to think the unattainability of nature regarded as a presentation of Ideas." So the human experience of sublimity refers to the representation of the object, not the object itself.²⁴¹

²⁴¹ Immanuel Kant. II. 23, 29, *Kant's Kritik of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard, (New York, London: MacMillan, 1892), 101-3
<https://archive.org/stream/kantskritikjudg00kantgoog#page/n156/mode/2up> Archive Dot Org, 2-2014

So, in the view of Burke, the sublime is the object which causes or is conversant with terror, pain and danger, and in Kant's work, published about thirty-seven years later, tells us that the sublime is rooted in the perception or representation of the object as it reaches the mind, and creates a sense of overwhelming incongruity with a higher "purposiveness" perceived in nature. This "purposiveness" is confirmed by the Beautiful and challenged by the Sublime, and so the Sublime is an experience of the overwhelmingly incongruous, whether the representation is so by way of magnitude, greatness in size or number, or dynamism, greatness in strength or force.²⁴²

Teleological purposiveness, congruity, incongruity and the Sublime in nature, were also themes in writing Natural Theology about the American landscape in the Early Republic. Natural Theology, a "fusion of Protestant Christianity and American natural history" is a little-understood literary movement of the learned and scientifically interested public. Americans in the Early Republic were "avid creators and consumers of a theology of nature" that brought about a space of religious consensus around nature in an era in which Americans argued often "vigorously and vociferously" about doctrinal matters. It was, indeed, by way of the teleological perspective of the theology of nature that lay and non-scientific Americans came to respect the authority of scientists and made scientific practice in

²⁴² Immanuel Kant. II.29, *Kant's Kritik of Judgment*, 134;
 Douglas Burnham, "Immanuel Kant, Aesthetics," Section C, The Sublime,
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/kantaest/#SH2c> *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1-2014

the United States more amenable to “patterns, more willing to pursue system-building, and more comfortable with the concept of expertise and an expert.”²⁴³

The theology of nature circulated in print, and encompassed many genres, as writers worked to influence readers toward a scientifically textured understanding of nature that linked its phenomena with divinity “to provide an appreciation for the divine miracle of creation throughout life.” American cultural historians have seen the American sublime as “intimately connected to the American landscape,” but they define it as “an emotional, aesthetic, and religious response inherited from Europe and adapted to America . . .” And so, as a result, present-day histories of the sublime focus narrowly on natural wonders like “Virginia’s Natural Bridge and New York’s Niagara Falls.” But, Lewis continues, the sublime is, “by definition, an emotional and intellectual response to an object and experience out of the ordinary, at which the viewer is simultaneously awed and terrified.” Sublime experiences, presumably in American experience and nature writing, were “moments of rupture. They were not part of daily routine,” and thus the sublime was not “a common . . . [or] sustainable category through which communion with the divine could be established.” Thus, even in the context of American natural theology writing, the sublime represents, simultaneously, the awe-inspiring and the incongruous.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Andrew Lewis. *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 109

²⁴⁴ Andrew Lewis. *A Democracy of Facts*, 115

Though Kant and the historian Lewis do not actually use the word “incongruous” in their works, the implication of incongruity as a characteristic of the sublime experience is clear in these texts, and it is from incongruity in experience that the humorous response is derived. In his book, *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature*, 1989, Paul Lewis, Professor of English at Boston College, argues that there are two points about humor that require no speculation. First that it is the result of the “perception of an incongruity; a pairing of ideas, images or events that are not ordinarily joined and do not seem to make sense together,” and second, that “in most cases, humor appreciation is based on a two-stage process of first perceiving an incongruity and resolving it.” The two statements sum up the public response to the Sea Serpent and are comprehensible in the contexts of both the Burkean and Kantian Sublime.²⁴⁵

Furthermore, Paul Lewis also indicates another relationship between the Burkean sublime and humor in his discussion between the latter and fear, which he discusses in a chapter on Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick*. “If the white whale and whales in general are dangerous incongruities, then the substance of *Moby-Dick* is an effort to observe, analyze, classify, and understand them.” In other words, the objectives of this novel are no different from those of the Sea Serpent observers and reporters. “The actual terrors of whaling” Ishmael encounters on the journey

²⁴⁵ Paul Lewis, *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor In Literature*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 8

“equal the imaginary horrors of earlier Gothic fiction,” and the reader observes that “lesser men are reduced by this constant terror to a limited range of response.”

Here we read of the freezing up, the inability to move and act that often characterizes the fearful response. Starbuck is “trapped within Christian morality” and so cannot confront, vanquish Ahab and save the ship. Ahab is “stripped of his humor” and so can only perceive “horror” and “affront, the insulting contempt of a universe containing Moby Dick.”²⁴⁶

Ishmael, however, has brought a sense of humor to the journey along with his intelligence, and thus “in this world of dangerous puzzles and limited responses, with all of his faculties intact, Ishmael represents a complete man . . . among parts of men.” The wreckage of the *Pequod* is perceptible long before it sinks in the crew’s terrified, rigid responses to Ahab’s rigid monomania. The fear reaction is rigidity, which becomes a tragic flaw. Ishmael’s sense of humor allows him to overcome terror, and makes possible his redemption from both wreckage and sea. While the Sea Serpent phenomenon gives us no literary product of such depth, the literary writing it generated helped lay a ground of curiosity and wonder through its linkage of the fearful, the sublime, and the use of humor in the resolution of incongruity in history and experience.²⁴⁷

In literature, the Sea Serpent inquiry began as desire, either to bring the creature closer or to pursue it, as shown in the example of the three poems quoted

²⁴⁶ Paul Lewis, *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor In Literature*, 147-8

²⁴⁷ Paul Lewis, *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor In Literature*, 148-9

below. In their works, the poets JONATHAN, Frederick W.A.S. Brown and Alonzo Lewis go beyond the pursuit of knowledge, and refer to the phenomenon in the context of the communities for which they are writing; the leap back from the object to the world of the observers and readers establishes their curiosity and the sublime grandeur in size and motion that characterize the Sea Serpent. The first work quoted is "The Sea Monster!" by an author calling himself JONATHAN in September, 1817,²⁴⁸ the second is "A Valedictory Poem. Address to the Sea Serpent, 1819, by a Bostonian, Frederick W.A.S. Brown, and the third is "Ode to the Sea Serpent," by historian and poet Alonzo Lewis, called the "Bard of Lynn," in *Love, Forest Flowers, and Sea Shells*, published in 1845.

GOOD mister Monster, pray how big art thou?

What is thy shape?—How art thou made?

Art fashion'd like a fish, snake, horse or how?

Come to the land and talk with me;

Be not afraid . . . ²⁴⁹

Oh thou! Great monster of the ocean,

Why can't your snakeship take a 'notion,'

²⁴⁸ From the text and a footnote attached to the poem as published on Sept. 13, 1817, in the *Newburyport Herald*, it is possible that the poet is John Pierpont, who was then living in Maryland and was just preparing his "Airs of Palestine" for publication. A detailed literary analysis of the contemporary body of his work in comparison with the rhetoric of "The Sea Monster!" might provide enough evidence for assuming his authorship. Another possibility is Pierpont's then partner, John Neal. Both were living in Maryland at the time and publishing their own periodical, *The Portico* [Baltimore, MD], Neal is the author of a poem about the Sea Serpent run that periodical titled "Pasquin's Sea Serpent."

²⁴⁹ JONATHAN. "The Sea Monster," *Newburyport Herald*, 13 Sept. 1817

Some pleasant day,
 To come to town and see the fashions,
 The virtues, vices and the passions,
 And leave the Bay [?].²⁵⁰

Hail! mighty serpent! who dost come
 From thy dark ocean cave, as some
 Great monarch of the water!
 Art thou a mild, pacific thing?
 Or dost thou seek, like earthly king,
 To dye the waves with slaughter?²⁵¹

The poets ask the same question: what is the Sea Serpent? To what category does he belong, of what categories does he partake? Unlike naturalists, those dealing with the Sea Serpent as a subject of literature had plenty of mythic precedents to which to refer, and plenty of possible answers to their question. The *Salem Gazette* proposed its own literary explanation of the Sea Serpent in its year-end poem for 1817 with an observation of public curiosity. The Sea Serpent elicited

²⁵⁰ Frederick W.A.S. Brown, "A valedictory poem addressed to the inhabitants of Rainsford's, George's, Gallop's, Light House, and Deer Islands, in Boston harbour," (Second Edition, Boston: True and Weston, 1819. Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, *Early American Imprints, Series II*, No. 47440) 47

²⁵¹ Alonzo Lewis. Alonzo Lewis, "Ode to the Sea Serpent," in *Love, Forest Flowers, and Sea Shells*, (Boston, MA: published by author, 1845), 81; http://books.google.ca/books?id=g70-AAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA81&dq=lewis,+alonzo,+sea+serpent&hl=en&sa=X&ei=Y1c8Ur3ePKXO2gWCr4CAD&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false Google Books, 7-2013
 Alonzo Lewis, "Ode to the Sea Serpent," http://myweb.northshore.edu/users/ccarlson/poetry/nahant/alonzo_lewis_ode_to_sea_serpent.html *Poetry of Places in Essex County*, Danvers, Lynn, Beverly, MA: North Shore Community College 8-2013

“full many guesses as on what errand he appear’d, and to the southward why he steer’d . . .”²⁵² The poet, having observed much curiosity about the creature, speculates that the Sea Serpent has come from “. . . old Neptune sent express,

And bound to President Monroe,
His diplomatic skill to show,
And bring dispatches and opinions,
Respecting the said god’s dominions,
By honest means or by intrigue,
To form an everlasting league,
That navigation shall be free,
In every river, creek and sea.”²⁵³

The author who signed himself Jonathan in the *Newburyport Herald* speculated more elaborately, “I will tell thee what folks think of thee.” He describes the Sea Serpent as it stretches itself out on the water’s surface, “looking like rum casks swimming in a row,” and when the creature writhes “to and fro, the sea is thrown in terrible commotion.” The Sea Serpent, “like other bloated reptiles, fill’d with pride” lifts his head high “above the tide,” and with his mouth open seems to say, “‘ye pygmies keep out of my way.’” Jonathan also remarks on the Sea Serpent’s mail-like coat, calling the monster’s integument “a clever thing, for many a war-like President and King.”²⁵⁴ Some of the reports suggested that the Sea Serpent was an

²⁵² “Address to the Carriers of the *Salem Gazette to its Patrons*,” 1 Jan. 1818

²⁵³ “Address to the Carriers of the *Salem Gazette to its Patrons*,” 1 Jan. 1818

²⁵⁴ JONATHAN. “The Sea Monster,” *Newburyport Herald*, 13 Sept. 1817

armored reptile, and his integument was one of the points of contention among the reports, with others remarking that his coat was smooth. Jonathan armored the Sea Serpent in order associate the animal with an important quality of powerful people, nations and armies, that is, the power to protect one's self. But Jonathan also suspects that the Sea Serpent might conceal, beneath his armor, another immigrant, because he inquires of the Serpent: "Like Europe's peasants, have you learnt to hate, your native clime . . . dost thou hither come,

Flying from justice, a French refugee . . .
Or art thou—like the Yankees who, of late,
Expect to find, sans labour care or money,
A place which flows with milk and honey,—
To western lands about to emigrate?"

Jonathan ends his speculation with a list of Biblical identities people had associated with the Sea Serpent, the whale that swallowed Jonah, Behemoth, Leviathan "of which Job writ . . . and some [declare] that thou art Satan from the pit." He concludes that whatever the Sea Serpent is, at the least it is "the mighty *Mogul* of the sea."²⁵⁵

Jonathan's poem reflects and observes a period of change in New England history, in which many Yankees were moving westward to New York and the northern Midwest. In the 1790s, they were settling the Western Reserve in Ohio,

²⁵⁵ JONATHAN. "The Sea Monster," *Newburyport Herald*, 13 Sept. 1817

which Connecticut “had long claimed as part of its colonial land grant.” Other New England settlers in the Old Northwest came from New England or upstate New York, and settled in the Great Lakes and northern regions of the Midwest, the pace of settlement was accelerated by the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. New Englanders’ westward movement was, as the migration from Old England had been, communal, “sometimes communities of several hundred would migrate together, replicating the name of the town from which they had come.” Hence the reason for the tremendous number of towns called “Springfield” in the nation, one each in Massachusetts, Vermont, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota, Colorado and Oregon. In 1800, approximately half a million people lived in the Trans-Appalachian west, in 1820, more than two million people lived there, and “never again did so large a portion of the nation live in new settlements.”²⁵⁶ ²⁵⁷

New England, in the early nineteenth-century was in a period of profound change, an assertion validated by several historians of the region writing between

²⁵⁶ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, Oxford History of the United States, (Oxford, New York: Oxford U P, 2007), 138-140

²⁵⁷ Though it is impossible to quantify foreign and the westward emigration of New Englanders between 1800 and 1820, by 1825, immigration was “a trickling stream” of about 1400 coming to New England from foreign ports. The War of 1812 “brought a lull” in the westward movement of New Englanders which, in the years preceding the war, “had already begun to assume large proportions.” When the War of 1812 ended, just as when the American Revolution ended, hard times followed it. James Truslow Adams tells us that these hard times were characterized by “various economic ills,” an increase in “the number of debtors.” In the culture, there was a certain “ferment on social and religious matters” that would prove transformative to New England societies in the long run, but “tended to drive many who were impatient of the old restraints out into the greater freedom of the West.” Simultaneously, for many New Englanders, political reform and religious tolerance were being instituted “too slowly at home for . . . independent and restless spirits.” Adams added that all these causes were recognized even at the time “as among the potent causes” for population loss. James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic: 1776-1850*, (Gloucester, MA: Smith, 1926; Boston: Little, Brown, 1927), 314

1892 and 1986.²⁵⁸ Tamara Thornton describes the reformist pursuits in agriculture of New England Federalist men at the time, and focusing on the writing and oratory of John Lowell. The message of these men, she tells us, as “articulated in the years after the War of 1812 when manufacturing established itself more firmly in Massachusetts, the commonwealth was in the midst of large-scale social and economic change—the process we have come to call modernization—and that farmers must therefore change too.”²⁵⁹ The climate of change in the immediate postwar period of the War of 1812 in Massachusetts is evident in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century histories of the region; James Truslow Adams, writing in 1926, titled his chapter in *New England in the Republic, 1776-1850*, “A New Outlook, 1815-1825”²⁶⁰ His contemporary, Samuel Eliot Morison, in *Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860*, 1921, titled his own chapter on the period

²⁵⁸ Jonathan tells us in his poem that people going west hold the expectation that they will find their fortune “sans labour, care or money.” For New Englanders, westward movement did not always involve the hardships, cross-cultural encounters and potential dangers of “the real frontier.” A farmer, artisan or professional could easily move to one of the more settled communities of Western New York and Pennsylvania, where there were many opportunities for starting one’s life again without losing “the advantages of fairly settled communities.” According to “contemporary accounts and the serious alarm which it caused,” westward movement from New England occurred on a vast scale. While such movement would not have been remarkable if only the debtors were doing it, “even more significant than the numbers of poor” emigrating were the “character and standing of . . . richer men who were doing the same thing.” All efforts to “stem the tide” were ineffectual, and the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 “acted like an open sluiceway to drain off the population of New England.” Additionally, within the region itself, there were changes in the population distribution and the “geographical distribution of business” between 1815 and 1825 that were illustrated by the post-war fate of the smaller Massachusetts seaports. James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic, 1776-1850*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1927), 304, 315

²⁵⁹ Tamara Thornton, “Between Generations: Boston Agricultural Reform and the Aging of New England, 1815-1830,” *New England Quarterly*, 59 2, (June, 1986): 190

²⁶⁰ “. . . if the peace was sudden, the psychological transformation of the country was equally so. For the preceding twenty years America had been swirling with other countries in the European whirlpool.” James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic*, 302

“The Passing of Salem, 1815-1845,”²⁶¹ Henry Adams, writing in 1892, titled his chapter “The Decline of Massachusetts.”²⁶² The titles of these works and their main idea statements all show the reader the same thing, a community and culture forming a different perspective and following new pursuits. The Sea Serpent phenomenon, in spite of its modest contribution to culture, was one source of the “new class of ideas” that would supply the thoughts of intellectuals either as scientists or as literary practitioners on the path to a genuine American literature.

As an experience, the Sea Serpent sighting was sublime because it possessed three features from Burke’s treatise that in themselves, were objects of terror. First, he describes “serpents and poisonous animals of all kinds” as objects of terror, and then second, he adds “things of great dimensions, if we annex an adventitious idea of terror, they become without comparison greater.”²⁶³ The last of these features, related to size, was vastness, and specifically, that of the ocean. Burke

²⁶¹ James Truslow Adams’s contemporary Samuel Eliot Morison, in *Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860*, 1921, titled his own chapter describing this period as “The Passing of Salem, 1815-1845.” He wrote that “The first few years of world peace were the severest test that maritime Massachusetts had ever met” because of the recovery of Europe’s “own carrying trade”; the slow opening of British trade with the U.S.; and because of westward expansion. Massachusetts was rendered more remote from a new national center of population; other ports had eclipsed Boston and Salem in importance in the national trade; and, finally, “New England Federalism made Massachusetts the butt and scorn of her sister states,” and so the state had lost influence in Washington. He concludes that “a sullen pessimism was the prevailing attitude on State Street.” Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 213, <http://archive.org/details/maritimehistory01morigoog> Internet Archive, 9-2013

²⁶² Henry Adams, writing in 1892, titled his chapter on the same era “The Decline of Massachusetts,” and yet, Adams discusses Massachusetts very little in his chapter. His most general statements about it are that “the long, exciting and splendid panorama of revolution and war, which for twenty-five years absorbed the world’s attention . . . vanished more quickly in America than Europe, and left fewer elements of disturbance.” He compared the change in the temper of American culture and politics to “the transformation scene of a pantomime . . . almost in a single instant, the public turned from interests and passions that had supplied its thought . . . and took up a class of ideas that had been unknown or but vaguely defined before.” Henry Adams, *History of the United States in the Administrations of James Madison*, (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1237

²⁶³ Burke. 2.II “Terror,” in *Philosophical Enquiry*, 58

wrote that to conceive of a vast, level plain on land “is no mean idea . . . but can it ever fill the mind with anything so great as the ocean itself?” It cannot, because the ocean, in its vastness and depth “is an object of no small terror.” In addition, terror, as perceiving in the object or experience, the distinct possibility of physical pain or death, is “the ruling principle of the sublime,” Burke concludes.²⁶⁴

And so from a Burkean perspective, the Sea Serpent would have been an object of terror both to see and to write about—the Serpent of the Ocean, as David Humphreys called him, could easily be equated with power as the imperial past and power of the British Empire, and, in a domestic sense, as the impulse toward imperialistic behavior on the part of the federal government and in the behavior of settlers on the southern and western frontiers in the Early Republic.

Though the Burkean analysis would indicate that the Sea Serpent provoked terror, the sighting reports often fail to include viewer reaction because of the utter subordination of every other consideration in writing to the fact-gathering objective. In spite of the frequent omission of these details, two Sea Serpent accounts involving mariners encountering the creatures in their vessels include the observers’ state of mind. The first, recorded in the *Essex Register*, was run under the title, “The Sea Monster!” in August, 1817. The article tells us that an unnamed fishing schooner “belonging to Newburyport,” was “standing into Cape Ann

²⁶⁴ Burke. 2.II “Terror,” in *Philosophical Enquiry*, 58-9

harbor.” The crew then “discovered the Serpent, which so greatly alarmed” them that they “bore away and went into Beverly.”²⁶⁵

The second narrative exemplifying terror can be found in the correspondence about the Sea Serpent written by David Humphreys, and published in New York City in the fall of 1817, and titled *Letters from the Hon. David Humphreys, F.R.S., . . . Containing Some Account of the Serpent of the Ocean*. The letters are of peculiar value as a travel narrative of coastal Massachusetts in 1817, and chronicle the Sea Serpent phenomenon in its first month. Humphreys justified his inclusion of this particular story by touching the scientific “democracy of facts” that prompted so much of the report literature and literary chords, stating that in it were “specific *facts* in evidence,” which “might still answer the double purpose of convincing unbelievers (for there are some who continue to treat the story as a fiction) and of exciting a lively interest” in the Sea Serpent. Humphreys’ narrating voice, in this letter, alters itself between the story, and the reflective paragraphs written afterward.

The story he related, in spite of his claims of specificity, mentioned no names or dates, and, in spite of the author’s intention of reporting, is a terror tale. On Sept. 6, 1817,²⁶⁶ a fishing boat met the Sea Serpent just off Salem harbor. Its crew, “unprovided with any instrument of annoyance or defence . . . found

²⁶⁵ “The Sea Monster!” *Essex Register*, 20 Aug. 1817

²⁶⁶ I have extrapolated this date from the date of the letter. Humphreys tells us it was “Last Saturday,” just one week before Sept. 13, 1817, the date of the letter.

themselves . . . in the very jaws of this *hideous monster*.”²⁶⁷ As the Sea Serpent followed them, and several times, he was within ten feet of their vessel.

Humphreys then shifts to a mode of subjective description, writing that they must have been “more than human” because they felt such “indescribable horror and dismay.” Though Humphreys does not use the adjective sublime in the letter, the story assumes the dimensions of an American tall tale, because his interpretation piles on superlative after superlative. “A situation more terrific can hardly be conceived by the most fertile imagination,” and yet, Humphreys continues, no historical fact “could be better attested; no exaggeration or embellishment is necessary . . .”²⁶⁸ But the narrative is replete with the supposedly unnecessary “exaggeration and embellishment,” because Humphreys has opted to depict the mariners’ state of mind, to make it the centerpiece of his story. Here the writer decided that the sublimity of the Sea Serpent is in the experience more than in the creature. Here Humphreys observes, as many people have, that truth is stranger than fiction and he uses this frequently perceived rather than reasoned dynamic to verify the story.

Despite not having seen the Serpent himself, Humphreys maintained an interest in communicating about the creature. He, upon his own reflection, at first attempts a de-mystifying explanation, and then elaborates on the serpent’s potential power. The chief two matters of fact about the incident that Humphreys

²⁶⁷ David Humphreys, *Letters of the Hon. David Humphreys . . . Containing Some Account of the Serpent of the Ocean*, (New York: Kirk and Mercein, 1817): 34 Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, *Early American Imprints II*, Shaw-Shoemaker, S41103

²⁶⁸ David Humphreys. *Letters of the Hon. David Humphreys . . .*, 34

lists after his story are that first, the Sea Serpent followed the vessel because he was “only intent on the multitudes of fish which fled before them,” and second, he had never shown “any indications of a disposition to chase or attack any moving object or living creature” with the exception of the fish that were his prey.²⁶⁹ And so experience dispels the fears depicted in the preceding paragraphs.

When Humphreys shifts his discussion from the realm of fact that contains all that the Serpent has been known to do, to conjecturing upon what the Serpent might do, he ceases to depend upon facts, and refers to associations, and toward the objective of a constructed rather than observed Sea Serpent. “How far the enmity placed between the *seed of the Woman* and the *seed of the Serpent*, has been extended from the land to the water . . . how much cunning and ferocity this stupendous variety of that venomous family possesses, we may probably learn should he ever be provoked to combat.” Humphreys imagines a time when the Sea Serpent, in pain and “prompted by revenge of injury,” will use “the wonderful powers and energies with which the Almighty Author of Being has undoubtedly endowed him.” Humphreys sees these powers and energies not just in scriptural or natural terms, but also in mechanical terms that, though they extol divine power, imply human progress and potential at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. “It remains to be learned . . . by what invisible springs, admirably contrived and adapted by the wisdom and omnipotence of the Creator to his internal structure and mechanism . . .” Indeed, Humphreys marvels in words that the Sea Serpent’s

²⁶⁹ David Humphreys. *Letters of the Hon. David Humphreys* . . . , 35

body is designed for “rapid movement and revolution,” two things that were powerful features of the body politic of the Atlantic world that the author, as a Revolutionary War soldier, officer, and American diplomat in Portugal and Spain in the 1790s, had observed in the course of his life.²⁷⁰

Humphreys’ letter is another text of power, the power to occupy the coastal sea off New England, the same territory blockaded by the British Empire three years before, and to frighten the fishermen of Salem and Gloucester in the element that gave so many of them subsistence and a few merchants such great wealth. It is also a text of the potential power of humanity, implied and even later stated, for as Humphreys admits that the community has no “Hercules nor demigods, or other killers of monsters,” and though the ages of chivalry and mythology are passed, and human beings are “dwindled down . . . to puny mortals of the nineteenth-century, there are enough daring whalemens and expert sharpshooters . . . for this not ignoble or inglorious strife . . .”²⁷¹

In critiques of historical British imperialism and of the U.S.’s own tendency toward imperialistic reach on land, writers used the Sea Serpent as a representation either of raw and juvenile domination of space and attention, or, through the creature’s observed timidity, of restraint and diplomacy. An interesting feature of the Sea Serpent writing, and a linkage to the political writing of the period, is the manner in which the creature is or fails to be developed as a character. In the case

²⁷⁰ David Humphreys. *Letters of the Hon. David Humphreys . . .*, 37

²⁷¹ David Humphreys. *Letters of the Hon. David Humphreys . . .*, 41

of the next example, the Sea Serpent is the subject of two stanzas of a year-end poem for 1817, and even though the two stanzas seem closed-ended, they express an idea that is directly related to the subject of the stanzas that follow. In her own assessment of the pamphlet writing, political and literary, of this period, legal historian Alison LaCroix found that it was “filled with shorthand references and subtle allusions—print culture’s equivalent of the stage whisper, insofar as the cryptic meanings would have been comprehensible to the majority of readers of political publications.”²⁷² In this literature, there are some, even one-sentence expressions that amount to subtle literary twitches or tics, and even though on their face, they seem to contribute little to the content of what surrounds them, whether it is in the same work or not, their meaning becomes apparent only upon critical reflection.

To demonstrate the power of Alison LaCroix’s political and literary stage whispers in relation to the Sea Serpent phenomenon, I’d like to begin with an example of the creature’s identification with American territorial ambitions and a critique from New Haven, Connecticut of the will to power as violence. On the first day of January, 1818, the *Connecticut Journal* of New Haven ran their annual “Address of the Carriers of the *Connecticut Journal* to its Patrons,” a poem listing

²⁷² Alison LaCroix. “A Singular and Awkward War: The Transatlantic Context of the Hartford Convention,” *American Nineteenth-Century History*, 6 1 (March, 2005), 14, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=921643 *Social Science Research Network*, 4-2014

and commenting on the top stories of the year, 1817. "Hearken my friends while I indite ye, things strange and true and great and mighty . . ." the poem begins.²⁷³

The first two adjectives describe the Sea Serpent and to make of him, by implication, a critique of American imperialistic power at the beginning of the First Seminole War. He is described as "A Monster, dreadful to behold, Yet worth his weight in solid gold . . ." The poem goes on to discuss the Sea Serpent's quiet industriousness in the acquisition of food, he moves in a "lengthen'd track, Pursuing swift, with honest zeal, Some school of herrings for a meal-- . . ." and despite the efforts of "many a cunning wight" to catch him, "No art could take this wondrous, monstrous, great Sea Snake."²⁷⁴

Furthermore, the Sea Serpent is depicted as a virtuous stranger in New England waters:

"Though huge his bulk, and new his feature,
He seem'd a harmless kind of creature—
Kill'd nobody and never went
One inch beyond his element--"²⁷⁵

The poem says that when the Serpent of Eden took to the sea, he transferred the art of deception to "Adam's sons and daughters . . ." The Sea

²⁷³ "Address of the Carrier . . . Jan. 1, 1818," *Connecticut Journal*, [New Haven: Converse] 1818, Broadside. Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, *Early American Imprints II*, Shaw-Shoemaker, S43716

²⁷⁴ "Address of the Carrier . . . Jan. 1, 1818," *Connecticut Journal*, [New Haven] 1818

²⁷⁵ "Address of the Carrier . . . Jan. 1, 1818," *Connecticut Journal*, [New Haven] 1818

Serpent is the “peerless monarch of the deep,” and “no privateersman.” In spite of the creature’s visible power and “sweep,” he had not “caused the tear of grief to roll down the wan cheek of any soul.” The Sea Serpent’s “pathless way,” the author elaborates yet further, was not marked with blood. These are the things the author of the poem finds to be strange, all of which are discussed only in the stanzas about the Sea Serpent.²⁷⁶

How much bleaker are the stanzas describing what is “true,” for this is the area of politics, where

“. . . battles, sieges, blood and fire
Present no subjects to inspire
Save where some Indian scalp remains,
One trophy more for General Gaines . . .”²⁷⁷

On the southern frontier of the United States, in November 1817 events progressed from tension and expansion into direct confrontation at a place called Fowltown, a Mikasuki community on the Flint River, just north of the Georgia-Florida line. The site of Fowltown, in the eyes of Edmund Pendleton Gaines, had been ceded to the United States in 1814 by the Treaty of Fort Jackson. Fowltown’s chief, Neamthla, refused to confer with Gaines over the U.S. claim to the territory and so Gaines, on November 21, dispatched an officer with 250 men to bring Neamthla to him. Mikasuki defenders fired on the advancing soldiers, but were

²⁷⁶ “Address of the Carrier . . . Jan. 1, 1818,” *Connecticut Journal*, [New Haven] 1818

²⁷⁷ “Address of the Carrier . . . Jan. 1, 1818,” *Connecticut Journal*, [New Haven] 1818

outnumbered and soon fled. Still, Neamthla remained free, and a larger group of soldiers was dispatched on the same errand. Again, the soldiers had failed to detain Neamthla, and two days later, U.S. soldiers burnt the village and the fields surrounding it.²⁷⁸ A local Indian Agent called Gaines's attack "an unwarranted use of force against people who had never been hostile . . ."²⁷⁹ Retaliation followed soon after when, on November 30, 1817, warriors from Fowltown and escaped slaves ambushed a boat on the Apalachicola River carrying 40 U.S. soldiers and eleven others from the Florida side of the border. Two men escaped, one woman was taken prisoner, the rest were either shot in the first volley of gunfire or beaten and butchered to death soon afterward. The Apalachicola River had become, in the autumn and winter of 1817, "a treacherous avenue for Americans, as vengeful Indians roamed the river's banks, awaiting the unfortunate white soul that came ashore or ran aground."²⁸⁰ These are the events that ignited the First Seminole War.

The reference from New Haven is to events in the autumn and winter of 1817 in Spanish East Florida that precipitated Andrew Jackson's engagement in the war. In its belligerence and bad faith respecting Spain's territorial claims on the region, the United States, as a nation, behaved not like a democratic republic under

²⁷⁸ William Belko. "Epilogue to the War of 1812: The Monroe Administration, Anglophobia, and the First Seminole War," in *America's Hundred Years' War: U.S. Expansion to the Gulf Coast and the Fate of the Seminole, 1763-1858*, (Gainesville, FL: Univ. of Florida Press, 2011): 76

²⁷⁹ Daniel Walker Howe. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2007): 98

²⁸⁰ William S. Belko. "Epilogue to the War of 1812: The Monroe Administration, Anglophobia, and the First Seminole War," 76

the rule of law, but like an imperial power; like Britain for example, whose yoke she had thrown away not forty years earlier.²⁸¹ A recent collection of historical essays on the Seminole conflicts edited by William Belko argues that the Seminole Wars fought by the United States from its founding to 1858 were part of a larger, century-long struggle that began in the 1760s. In the British period of the wars, 1763-1783, the Seminole “emerged unwittingly as victims of an aggressive Anglo-American expansion,” and “this unrelenting American expansion laid the groundwork for the ultimate destruction of the Seminole people . . .” In the years after the War of 1812, “U.S. expansion reached its zenith,” and “the sword now accompanied, and in most cases, preceded the quill.” The Seminole Wars represent a peculiar, national adherence to power in action, a costly irony in a polity ostensibly committed to the creation of liberty that was not lost on the literary observer in New Haven, 1817.²⁸²

In December, 1817, the United States government demonstrated an imperial attitude and adherence to aggression in their dealings with Florida because upon receiving the news concerning East Florida, John C. Calhoun, James Monroe’s Secretary of War, issued orders to Gaines on December 16, 1817, demanding “satisfactory reparations from the Seminoles, as all refugees in Florida, red or black,

²⁸¹ “America’s growing and increasingly mobile population exerted powerful diplomatic leverage against the thinly populated and static colonies on the nation’s borders. . . . The Europeans were on notice that they would have difficulty defending their North American colonies from the United States.” Even the threat of British aggression against U.S. expansion justified American aggression post 1815 because “American politicians could urge that the United States had to take new territories immediately or risk losing them to British interlopers.” Jerald Coombs, *History of American Foreign Policy, Vol. I*, 3rd Edition, (M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 58

²⁸² William Belko. “Introduction,” in *America’s Hundred Years’ War: U.S. Expansion to the Gulf Coast and the Fate of the Seminole, 1763-1858*, 8

were called” and threatened “if atonement was not forthcoming (it is not clear what would have been acceptable), the general was to cross into Florida and attack the Seminoles.”²⁸³ The orders represent a declaration of war without the sanction of Congress, and, soon afterward, on December 26, Calhoun gave command of operations in Florida to Andrew Jackson, a choice that “showed a disposition in Washington for a commander of demonstrated energy and aggressiveness.”²⁸⁴

New Haven, Connecticut, in January, 1818, was far away in sensibility and experience from the Florida frontiers. As the subject of a year-end poem for the *Connecticut Journal*, the Sea Serpent appearing in such close proximity to New Haven in comparison is “monstrous,” with “glowing eyes” and”

“Though terrible to human sight,
Stronger than mortal man or might,
Ne’er was he known, it is a fact,
To do one single human act.”²⁸⁵

In the poem the violence perpetrated by the Mikasuki and Seminoles is rational, they are “untutor’d sons of earth,” fighting for “their dearest right.” The poem does not mention the motives behind U.S. expansion and the violence against the people Belko calls “Americans” in East Florida because “one side we hear, and

²⁸³ Daniel Walker Howe. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, : 98

²⁸⁴ Daniel Walker Howe. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, 98-99

²⁸⁵ “Address of the Carrier . . . Jan. 1, 1818,” *Connecticut Journal*, [New Haven] 1818

all we know comes always from the Indian's foe-- . . ." ²⁸⁶ The Sea Serpent's monstrous aspect describes by implication the monstrous and imperialistic behavior the federal government allowed in November, 1817. The Sea Serpent, like every American, possesses power in himself, but threatens no one; he does no "human" things. Americans on the southern frontier may be humanly frail, but possess citizenship. On American soil, they have power in themselves; and yet, as they traverse a border the federal government does not respect, they behave monstrously. The words opening this chapter come to mind, "Know ye who live from East to West, that I with sovereign pow'r am blessed." ²⁸⁷ Though they were written for the Sea Serpent, in the *Connecticut Journal* year-end poem, such "sovereign pow'r" is shifted from the Sea Serpent and toward the agency and movement of the United States in its government and citizens. Therefore, the poem gives the reader a picture of power with two sets of associations, first as the "harmless type of creature" and second as the scalp-grasping Edmund Gaines, and then opposes both against the simple liberty symbolized by the motives of the Indians. The opposition of liberty and power was a dominant theme in the political culture of the Revolutionary, Early Republic and Antebellum eras. Thus we are shown that the Sea Serpent, because of his potential power, may be terrible in form, but not terrible in action. It is the human being and his creation, the nation, the army, the settlement, as he is possessed by the desire for domination of the

²⁸⁶ "Address of the Carrier . . . Jan. 1, 1818," *Connecticut Journal*, [New Haven] 1818

²⁸⁷ Leviathan. "The SEA SERPENT," *The Idiot*, 11 July 1818.

land and rivers, the dispossession and extermination of the other, that becomes the object of terror and source of the sublime.

And not only does the poem contain a critique of American violence, but in its first discrete subject, the Sea Serpent, the author finds beauty and what William Cullen Bryant would have called a “moral expression.” By a contemporary, associationist interpretation, the Sea Serpent was aesthetically powerful, even an activating force in the creation of American literature, because associationists defined the “beautiful object” as being “one which encouraged the mind to follow out trains of associated ideas,” and in order for beauty to exist, the object also had to possess a “moral expression.” Moral, in the context of the literature and rhetoric of the Early Republic did not mean “didactic or pious, but possessing a definite content of ideas, together with the ability to incite to action the onlooker’s or reader’s mind.”²⁸⁸

And the idea most associated with the Sea Serpent in writing is power, potential and active, which, in the case of the Connecticut poem, expresses itself in terms of the Burkean concept of the sublime. The great majority of the writing about the Sea Serpent does not focus on the creature as an object of terror by itself, but uses the Sea Serpent’s associated ideas to invoke features of the present and, in the case of New England, the recent past, as the first fifteen years of the nineteenth-century.

²⁸⁸ Robert E. Streeter. “Association Psychology and Literary Nationalism . . .,” 250

To gain literary flexibility with the Sea Serpent phenomenon, writers had to distance themselves from the creature and the claims of those who studied and viewed him. The issue of veracity and credulity in the rhetoric and details of sighting narratives and attempts to catch the Sea Serpent, in the minds of literary practitioners, had to be upstaged by a playful suspension of disbelief in the Sea Serpent, and so the intensity of astonishment and terror could gain temporal and spatial distance, and make way for the “certain modifications” that would turn the Sea Serpent into something that Burke would have called delightful.²⁸⁹ The wonder bottled in the sighting narratives would be controlled and made to serve the objectives of literature, and while the Sea Serpent was not amorphous, as an imagined creature, he would swim in places beyond Gloucester harbor. New England and American writers, and not New England fishermen or whalers, had caught the Sea Serpent.

The process, that can be explained in terms of a shift from McLuhan’s hot medium of the reports into the cooler mediums of art and literature, did not take long and forms the considered literary response to the Sea Serpent. The first of the certain modifications the Sea Serpent phenomenon would have been subject to was the redirection of the creature towards metaphor and away from the democracy of facts. This is demonstrated in literary pieces written in the years of the most sightings that do not follow the fact-creating protocol of the reports. The imagined Sea Serpent answers the questions learned and unlearned observers

²⁸⁹ Edmund S. Burke. “1.VII, Of The Sublime,” 36-37

could not address—his origin, behavior and aspirations, attitudes about humanity, and more displays of his power.

One of the first significant literary responses to the Sea Serpent is a book-length work published sometime in the fall of 1817, along with David Humphreys' *Some Account of the Serpent of the Ocean* and the *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England . . .*, titled *Great Sea-serpent, Upon the Coast of New-England, the Largest Ever Seen in America*, 1817, by an author who signed himself "Neptune," and we shall refer to him as "Neptune" hereafter, but who is believed to be John W. Boynton. The book is a twenty-page pastiche of articles from August to October, 1817, that contains original narrative and other literary material.

In Neptune's brief book, the Sea Serpent is the original serpent in Genesis, who, in the process of paying the price for "interference in family concerns," was condemned to crawl all his life and to have his head bruised "by the seed of the woman." The serpent did not want to be subject to the "*dominion* of the *weakly* sex," so he departed "the part of earth in which women "rule every thing," that is, from the land. So "for 5,817 years (almost) this noble reptile has flounced about in my dominions in his hissing grandeur," Neptune writes.²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ John W. Boynton, *Great Sea-serpent, Upon the Coast of New-England in 1817*, (Hartford, 1818, Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, *Early American Imprints II*, Shaw-Shoemaker, S43432), 6

Neptune's explanation of the Sea Serpent's travels and interests draw upon recent American and Atlantic history. The Sea Serpent has traveled to Asia, Africa and he has "now come to visit the *New World*" because he chooses to "show his prowess by dashing in right amongst *great* fellows." He therefore "sculled himself into Cape Ann . . . in full view of the most tremendous whalemens that ever spread terror in my dominions." And so the piece expresses the confidence of coastal New Englanders in their fisheries and commerce, for the Sea Serpent is coming not as a stranger, but to acquaint himself with people of similar interests.

Neptune carries an extended piece titled "THE SEA SERPENT AND 'HATCHET,'" an article he characterized as perhaps "too humourous for this subject." The essay considers the meaning of the Sea Serpent for two classes of people, philosophers and politicians, and two classes that represent, obviously, the categories of knowledge and power. Philosophers "consider the phenomenon as leading to the introduction of a new species of fish" that would inaugurate a new and abundant serpentine fishery on the New England coast. The essay then brings in a character, from out of nowhere, called the Major, who surmises that the Sea Serpent is a female and pregnant. The Major can "explain mysteries, 'bury hatchets,' . . . on all occasions he has such a peculiar group of non-descripts, subservient to his purposes, that the whole serves to enliven the public mind . . ." But if, indeed, there is a pregnant Sea Serpent off the coast, then "all the cod, haddock, eels, smelts, lobsters, and even salmon, shad and alewives, would not be sufficient to feed the young brood . . . for one year," Neptune concludes. Indeed,

“the whole ocean within the American coasts would be speedily desolated,” and people living on the coasts afterward would be constantly “alarmed with the depredations made on our coasts by shoals of serpents attacking our vessels, and swallowing up whole crews of unwary mariners.” This is the understanding of philosophers, not just the Major himself, Neptune adds.²⁹¹

The use of the word “depredations” to describe the imagined activities of a shoal of sea serpents on the coast, along with the image of the coast thus desolated, would have brought to mind the depredations of Britain against New England commercial shipping on the ocean in the years after 1805, and against the New England coast during the War of 1812; events still recent in the memories of people living in 1817. One of the Sea Serpent’s most important associations is a name the creature was called, leviathan of the deep, a name whose origin lies in the maritime conflicts in the first decade of the nineteenth-century. After 1817, the appellation linked the image of the monster, the leviathan of the deep, immediately before and after 1817, to British interests, and almost never, to French. The realization was not lost on several writers, that where the Sea Serpent was making his appearances after 1817 had been the province of British blockade, depredation, and menace in the years before.

The association originated in a speech given by in the Senate John Randolph in the Senate, and concerned possible American responses to the Scott Decision of 1805. Because of this case, the British Empire cracked down on neutral trade in the

²⁹¹ John W. Boynton. *Great Sea-serpent, Upon the Coast of New-England in 1817*, 12-13

West Indies, devising and implementing “legislation and rules necessary for taking charge of the commerce of Cuba, Martinique and other hostile colonies,” while the Lords of Appeals were “providing the law necessary for depriving America of the same trade.”²⁹² The result of their actions ended the often-used “subterfuge of the ‘broken voyage’ . . .” in which, briefly, ²⁹³

These measures frustrated ocean-going commerce, the re-export trade and neutral shipping, as seizure of ships and impressments of sailors increased. By the beginning of 1806, U.S. ships “by the score were seized without warning” and “neutral insurance was doubled . . .” When news of the Scott decision reached the United States, merchants “were indignant, and their anger steadily rose as the confiscation of American ships more general.” Americans involved in this conflict faced two choices, go to war or simply submit to the new policies. War would have a destructive effect upon American commerce, and “retaliation short of war would not only prove ineffective, but would injure American merchants alone.”²⁹⁴ Jacob Crowninshield, a merchant from Salem and Republican Representative from Massachusetts between 1801 and remained in office until his death 1808, wrote to Jefferson that the merchants living in his community were “very uneasy” about the Scott decision, “as it strikes deeply at our export trade in foreign articles and will

²⁹² Henry Adams. *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 632

²⁹³ Drew McCoy. *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America*, (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996), 211-212

²⁹⁴ Henry Adams. *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 701

ultimately injure the whole commerce of the country.”²⁹⁵ In spite of the centrality of the protection of ocean commerce to the Federalist understanding of naval expansion, the chief advocate for an aggressive American response to the fallout of the Scott decision was Crowninshield, who represented Salem in early in 1806. He argued in favor of war in puffed-up rhetoric: “should Britain persist in her captures and . . . oppressive treatment of our seamen . . . I would not hesitate to meet her in war,” and boasted that the militia of Vermont and Massachusetts alone would be enough to overwhelm Canada and Nova Scotia. “Some of her West Indian islands,” he added, “will also fall.”²⁹⁶

When Crowninshield stopped speaking, Republican John Randolph of Virginia responded that he would not go to war for a thing that was impossible to protect, “I deem it no sacrifice to say to the Leviathan of the deep: we are unable to contend with you in your own element, but if you come within our actual limits, we will shed our last drop of blood in their defence.”²⁹⁷ And here, in this fragment of Randolph’s oration, we encounter two features of Sea Serpent literature, the use of “your own” or “its own element,” that being the sea, and “Leviathan of the deep,” an appellation that would become a common name for the Sea Serpent after 1817.

²⁹⁵ Crowninshield to Jefferson, Sept. 11, 1805, Jefferson Papers, in Drew McCoy. *The Elusive Republic*, 211

²⁹⁶ Jacob Crowninshield, *Annals of Congress*, (1805-1806): 555, in Henry Adams. *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 711

²⁹⁷ John Randolph, *Annals of Congress*, *Annals of Congress*, (1805-1806): 555, in Henry Adams. *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 711, 712; “Mr. Randolph’s Speech, continued,” in *Balance and Columbian Repository*, 5 14, (April 8, 1806): 108, Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*.

In the same speech, Randolph uses a metaphor that illustrates a Jeffersonian concept of American development, that privileged domination of the land over the eminence and wealth garnered by commerce at sea, “What! Shall this great Mammoth of the American forest leave his native element, and plunge into the water in a mad contest with the shark?”²⁹⁸ The two figures of speech, taken together in the same oration, amount to another of the political stage whispers observed by Alison LaCroix. Taken by themselves, each expresses just one discrete idea; in the context of their historical present and subsequent decades, however, the former in particular, “leviathan of the deep,” would occur repeatedly, as an epithet in capital letters for the Sea Serpent in the writing of New Englanders.

The mammoth metaphor distilled the Jeffersonian case against an ocean-going navy, a corollary of the Republican Party’s agrarian vision for national development. In the 1790s, the navy’s first detractors argued that the construction of such a force, “fitting out, and manning warships,” would result in “large expenditures and mounting taxes.” A large amount of wealth would be transferred from the many to the few, and so naval expansion was thought to be “a source of political corruption,” and the case for this statement was clear in the conflict described by Harry Watson between liberty and power. The thinking here anticipates the thesis of Alfred Thayer Mahan in *The Influence of Sea Power on History, 1660-1783*, 1890, an influential, polemical history published at a time when

²⁹⁸ John Randolph, *Annals of Congress*, *Annals of Congress*, (1805-1806): 555, in Henry Adams. *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 712; “Mr. Randolph’s Speech, continued,” in *Balance and Columbian Repository*, 5 14, (April 8, 1806): 109, Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*.

American sea power was “in this our period of commercial and naval decadence.”²⁹⁹ In the early nineteenth-century, Republicans also made a peculiar, defeatist case that naval expansion was “a costly and dangerous expedient that would be overwhelmed by the British navy,”³⁰⁰ and “caused more dangers than it prevented or corrected.”³⁰¹

The Republican Party was divided on how to respond to British belligerence on the ocean and the Scott decision. Pamphleteer and Pennsylvania Republican Clement C. Moore, whose writing was influenced by Adam Smith and who followed the objective of maintaining an agricultural society, in his advocacy for limiting foreign trade wrote that “the wartime carrying trade,” did not facilitate the creation of a modest manufacturing sector because it did not “promote the internal industry of the people by offering a free vent for their surplus produce . . .” Instead, the re-export commerce Crowninshield would have confronted the British empire to protect created “‘rapid and exorbitant’ profits [that] only fed the luxury of a mercantile elite” and thus capital would be drained away from agriculture and “‘natural commerce’ allied to it.”³⁰² The intellectual platform of Moore’s opinions on commerce, manufactures and agriculture can be found in debates about the social progress of the nation, and the kind of society Americans wanted to have.

²⁹⁹ Alfred Thayer Mahan. *The Influence of Sea Power on History, 1660-1783*, Twelfth Edition, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1918); Project Gutenberg E-Book #13529, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13529/13529-h/13529-h.htm> Project Gutenberg, 8-2013

³⁰⁰ “The Re-Establishment of the Navy, 1787-1801, Historical Overview and Select Bibliography,” <http://www.history.navy.mil/biblio/biblio4/biblio4a.htm> The Naval Historical Center, 8-2012; Donald Hickey. Donald Hickey. *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, (IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2012): 32

³⁰¹ Henry Adams. *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 151

³⁰² Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*, 213

While Republicans favored land-based expansion, the development of agrarianism, and limited, home-based manufactures with little commerce abroad, expansion at sea by naval and commercial activity was the special interest of the Federalists and all merchants involved in maritime commerce. Accordingly, President John Adams inaugurated the U.S. Navy by an act of Congress in 1794 and the Federalists, between the 1790s and 1815, adhered with consistency to a policy assumption, derived from classical Rome, and the farewell address of George Washington that “to preserve peace a nation must be prepared for war.”³⁰³ The primary reason for the existence of a navy was the protection of commerce,³⁰⁴ and this policy assertion would be reiterated about a hundred years afterward by Alfred Thayer Mahan, who wrote in 1890, during a period of serious naval decline, that naval expansion was directly related to the size of a nation’s maritime fleet and the extent of its commerce.³⁰⁵ Where a nation’s commerce was well-protected on the high seas by a vigorous navy, it could, as a result, become more extensive, and thus by trade and sword, the nation could project power in the world.³⁰⁶ So the questions of the navy, how many and what kind of ships it should have, and where it should go and do at sea, all questions concerning the projection of power over the sublime sea, were and would remain points of contention between Federalists

³⁰³ Donald Hickey. “Federalist Defense Policy in the Age of Jefferson, 1801-1812,” in *Military Affairs*, 45 2, (April, 1981): 64, 66 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27790356>, JSTOR, 1-2010

³⁰⁴ Donald Hickey. “Federalist Defense Policy in the Age of Jefferson, 1801-1812,” 64

³⁰⁵ Alfred Thayer Mahan. “Chapter I, The Elements of Sea Power,” in *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1890): 26; Project Gutenberg EBook #13529, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13529/13529-h/13529-h.htm#Page_26 Project Gutenberg, 8-2013

³⁰⁶ Alfred Thayer Mahan. “Chapter I, The Elements of Sea Power,” in *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, 26; Project Gutenberg EBook #13529, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13529/13529-h/13529-h.htm#Page_26 Project Gutenberg, 8-2013

and Republicans from at least 1794 to 1815. After 1800, the conflict over maritime commerce intensified because New England Federalists found themselves “on the defensive after 1800, when a series of Virginia Republicans occupied the presidency,” as they were “increasingly challenged by ‘democrats’ at home.”³⁰⁷

The Republican vision of an agrarian nation expanding on land and possessing a limited foreign commerce was reflected in their retreat from the policy objective of an ocean-going navy and in their responses to the crisis after the Scott, or *Essex* Decision, 1805-6, the inauguration of a gunboat system of coastal defenses, the Embargo, 1807, and the drawdown of naval forces at the beginning of the Madison Administration, 1809.

In 1806, Jefferson inaugurated the gunboat system for coastal defense advocated by Southern Republicans in Congress in 1807 because of the gunboats’ “assumed cheapness.” Though a gunboat “cost some ten-thousand dollars or less” and a “flotilla . . . could be built for the price of a frigate,” no one knew just how much the cost of annual repairs or actual service accruing to the proposed flotilla would be. Gunboats, because of their low price and reduced usefulness, were an apt naval expression of the Republican objective of preserving an agricultural society with limited foreign commerce.

Even when Jefferson faced the crisis of the attack on the USS *Chesapeake* by the HMS *Leopard* in June, 1807, his response was passively defensive, he had no

³⁰⁷ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820*, (Chapel Hill, London: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997): 252

intention of meeting strength with strength. He first “interdicted all British vessels of war from entering . . . American waters,” and proposed an expansion in the fleet of naval gunboats. James Fenimore Cooper argued later that the United States, in 1807, had no navy capable of raising a blockade, and so there was no way of enforcing Jefferson’s “interdict.” In December, 1807, legislation was recommended to fund the construction of additional gunboats. Not one Federalist voted for the bill. Thus were “misdirected the resources of a great and growing country,” toward coastal instead of the protection of the maritime fleet on the high seas.

The further retreat from the projection of power as a well-protected maritime commerce was evident in Jefferson’s alternative to war in 1807, the Embargo Act, which would also find a place among the associations attached to the Sea Serpent by New England writers. The Embargo of 1807 was passed to “protect domestic vessels and sailors from possible seizure,” and “to inflict economic costs on Britain in the hope of forcing them to change their policy.”³⁰⁸ In spite of its being an alternative to war, a few months into the embargo, the policy was showing destructive effects similar to those of war, beginning with civil liberties. In America, “personal liberties and rights of property were more directly curtailed by the

³⁰⁸ Douglas Irwin. “The Welfare Cost of Autarky: Evidence from the Jeffersonian Trade Embargo, 1807-09,” in *Review of International Economics*, 13 4, (2005): 632-633

embargo,” than in Britain, which had experienced “centuries of almost continuous foreign war.”³⁰⁹

The Embargo proved more destructive than war because even when the east coast was entirely blockaded in 1814, “the American Treasury collected six million dollars from imports.” In 1808, “customs yielded only a few thousand dollars “on cargoes that happened to be imported for some special purpose.”³¹⁰

In early 1808, the Embargo showed an effect, as “few American vessels appeared in European ports” and tonnage from the U.S. entering British ports had fallen 80% by volume from 1807. American merchants, frustrated with the embargo, and anticipating that the policy would end soon, were “tempted to ignore it,” and it was not long before temptation turned into action. Among American export commodities, four raw materials dominated trade, raw cotton, flour, tobacco and rice, and in 1807, these accounted for two-thirds of all exported U.S. domestic produce. Their prices fell 27% between December 1807 and June, 1808, and “bottomed out in the summer of 1808.” Prices for these commodities started to recover later that year, evidence that “merchants were willing to violate the embargo as time went on.”³¹¹

Though the Embargo has been cast as a catalyst for the growth of manufactures in the United States during its 14-month duration, its effect as a

³⁰⁹ Henry Adams, *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 1115-1117

³¹⁰ Henry Adams. *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 1115-1117

³¹¹ Irwin. “The Welfare Cost of Autarky: Evidence from the Jeffersonian Trade Embargo, 1807-09,”

stimulus toward manufactures was “temporary and ineffective.”³¹² A precise measure of the Embargo’s impact on manufactures is hard to ascertain because the policy lasted only 14 months; had it lasted longer, “domestic producers would have been able to establish much higher levels of output of previously imported goods.” While there is some anecdotal evidence for the development of manufactures, there is other evidence showing a 17% drop in industrial production for the nation as a whole between 1807 and 1808.³¹³ Irwin concluded finally that “information on production substitution is incomplete and the existing evidence is mixed.”³¹⁴

Only in New England was the constitutionality of the Embargo challenged directly in the court of Judge John Davis, “one of the soundest of Federalists,” and the same man who would chair the Linnaean Society of New England’s Committee that investigated the Sea Serpent in the autumn of 1817. Davis may have been a Federalist living in coastal Massachusetts, but he also harbored a deep respect for law. He argued that the “necessary and proper” clause, along with the doctrine of “inherent sovereignty” empowered Congress to lay the embargo “for purpose of safety, of preparation, or counteraction . . . where,” Davis asked, “do we find them limited as to the duration more than as to the manner and extent of the measure?”³¹⁵

³¹² Henry Adams. *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 1117

³¹³ Douglas Irwin, “The Welfare Cost of Autarky: Evidence from the Jeffersonian Trade Embargo, 1807-09,” 639

³¹⁴ Douglas Irwin, “The Welfare Cost of Autarky: Evidence from the Jeffersonian Trade Embargo, 1807-09,” 639

³¹⁵ Judge John Davis, in Henry Adams, *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 1111-11114;

In New England particularly, where Henry Adams tells us that, “the struggle of existence was keenest, the embargo struck like a thunderbolt . . .”³¹⁶ because of the centrality of “foreign commerce and shipping” to “the life of the people. The ocean, as [Timothy] Pickering said, was their farm.” In spite of their complaints about the Embargo, and their suspicions that Jefferson and his Republicans were secretly supporting France to strike “a deadly blow at New and Old England at once,” and in the face of “immense losses, sweeping away their savings and spreading bankruptcy through every village,” Adams concludes that the New Englander could economize more effectively and capitalize upon his own “energy, shrewdness, and education” than any other American at the time.³¹⁷ In Massachusetts alone, shipbuilders, chain smiths, and anchor shops “were among many smaller manufacturers that faced permanent ruin. The Embargo ravaged all the state’s industries and thousands experienced irrevocable losses.”³¹⁸ At the onset of the Embargo, the Federalists of New England, whose political fortunes were falling toward the extinction of their party as a national political entity, were Anglophilic in their attitudes toward the protracted Atlantic conflict, and represented shipping interests. They were certain that, by the Embargo, the Jeffersonians were singling out England “for special hostility” and that New England

Walter W. Jennings, *The American Embargo, 1807-1809*, University of Iowa Studies, Studies in the Social Sciences, edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, VIII I, First Series, No. 55, Dec. 1, 1931 (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa, 1921): 124;

³¹⁶ Henry Adams, *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 1119

³¹⁷ Henry Adams, *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 1120

³¹⁸ “Chapter 5, O Grab Me!” in Dinah Mayo-Bobee, “Something energetic and spirited”: Massachusetts Federalists, rational politics, and political economy in the age of Jefferson, 1805—1815,” (Ph.D. diss. University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 2007), 226

was “to be ruined for the sake of saving the rest of the nation the expense or suffering of war.”³¹⁹ Though the claim has been made that the Embargo’s result in New England was “not so severe” as stated previously in histories like that of Henry Adams, and that its effects were felt more “particularly in Virginia, than in New England, although opposition centred in the latter section,” as argued by Edward Channing, James Truslow Adams, writing in 1926, addressing Channing specifically, stated that “the facts, however, point to severe economic distress throughout New England as an immediate result of Jefferson’s policy.”³²⁰ Channing’s argument is stated in dubious rhetoric; he chooses to cast doubt on the Embargo having negative or damaging effects by conceding at first that “there is abundant proof that the New England seacoast was affected for a time.” He describes these short-term effects as being “embargo rents” on buildings, one dentist in Boston offering his services “at half price,” “instances of drowning of seamen in Salem” that could have been “nothing more than lack of expertness in handling small boats that is often found in those that traverse the sea in ships.” In spite of “soup kitchens” being opened in Portland, Maine “and at some other places,” there was a pronounced “absence of demand for increased relief, if the amount of money voted for the care of the poor can be taken as presumptive proof.”³²¹ The total exports from Massachusetts, in 1807 were 10,100,000 dollars, in 1808, they had been reduced to 5,100,000 dollars “and the declines in the other New England states

³¹⁹ James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic*, 249

³²⁰ James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic*, 250;

Edward Channing. *History of the United States, Volume IV*, (New York: MacMillan, 1917): 388-394

³²¹ Edward Channing, “Chapter XIV, Commercial Warfare,” in *History of the United States, Volume IV, Federalists and Republicans, 1789-1815*. (New York: MacMillan, 1917): 388

were in similar proportion.”³²² All along the American coast, the embargo caused economic damage that was well-documented in New England. In Yarmouth, Massachusetts, “offered public assistance to any resident in want of the necessities of life due to the embargo’s impact,” Newburyport “set up soup-houses for those in need,” and “sections of the Maine coastline found more than one out of two men unemployed.” In January, 1808, a survey found 16 ships and 27 brigs laid up at Bath, Maine.³²³ Garnering information about trade in this period is difficult, and where historians are wont to argue in broad terms, the economist Irwin, in his more restricted, forensic approach to the problem, asserts that “growing domestic opposition to the trade restrictions, especially in New England, forced Congress to repeal the measure in March, 1809.”³²⁴

Protest against the embargo took many forms, and was most intense in New England. The first of these was the increasing “Federalization” of New England in the elections of 1808, a pattern acknowledged by Jefferson himself in letters to Thomas Leiper and William Short. To Short, Jefferson wrote that the Embargo had “federalized three of the New England states. Connecticut, you know, was so before.”³²⁵ Where there had been 24 Federalist legislators in Congress in 1806, in 1808 there were 50. In the election of 1808, Madison carried every region of the

³²² James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic*, 250; Adams’s statistics are drawn from Walter Wilson Jennings, *The American Embargo, 1807-1809, with Particular to its Effect On Industry*, VIII 1, First Series, No. 55, University of Iowa Studies in the Social Sciences;

³²³ James Ellis, *Ruinous and Unhappy War: New England in the War of 1812*, (New York: Algora, 2011): 39

³²⁴ Douglas Irwin, “The Welfare Cost of Autarky: Evidence from the Jeffersonian Trade Embargo, 1807-09,” 632-633

³²⁵ Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, Vol. IX, pages 239-249, in Walter W. Jennings. *The American Embargo, 1807-1809*, 132

country except New England. Even on a local level, New England protest was so resonant in federal center of the nation that to the day of his death, Jefferson never forgot “the outcry of the New England towns.”³²⁶

Local protest against the Embargo in New England involved both literature and spectacle. As early as January, 1808, “eighty to one-hundred sailors in Boston, “carrying a flag at half mast, marched with martial music to the governor’s house and demanded work or bread.” They marched toward the governor’s mansion, where Massachusetts Governor James Sullivan talked to them briefly, and they dispersed.³²⁷ In a literary sense, protest began as inflammatory notices that were also veiled inquiries about power in New England. “An Embargo Upon Our Coasting Trade!! . . . Forbid it, ye Citizens of the extensive Sea Coast of Massachusetts!”³²⁸ The next avenue of protest was by way of town meetings, the drawing up of petitions and memorials. Though many communities of New England and New York did not choose to “forbid it,” many more in New England “condemned the Embargo.”³²⁹ After the Enforcement Act of January 9, 1809 was passed, newspapers, protests and town meetings “became very inflammatory,” with one imploring readers in Newburyport, Massachusetts to “give ear no longer to the siren voice of democracy” and called the democracy of Jefferson Administration “a cursed delusion, adopted by traitors, and recommended by sycophants.”

³²⁶ Henry Adams. *History of the United States in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson*, 1230

³²⁷ Walter W. Jennings, *The American Embargo, 1807-1809*, 95

³²⁸ *Boston Gazette*, March 18, 1808,

in Walter W. Jennings. *The American Embargo, 1807-1809*, 133

³²⁹ Walter W. Jennings. *The American Embargo, 1807-1809*, 134-5

Increasingly, the Embargo came to be seen as a move favorable to France, and resolutions from no fewer than 32 town meetings in Massachusetts and the district of Maine, and “from dozens of other places came pouring on Jefferson and Congress,” which condemned the government’s perceived hostility to Britain and ““cringing sycophancy”” to France. The resolution from Gloucester, Massachusetts in particular, claimed that the resources of the nation and “all our naval forces and all our militia [are] placed under the control of this same foreigner, whom we cannot but think a satellite of Bonaparte.”” ³³⁰

Such expressions turned downright mythic and morbid when the first anniversary of the Embargo’s inauguration, December 22, 1808 came, and New Englanders considered the future of their maritime commerce. At Salem, Beverly, Portland, Boston and Providence, Rhode Island, a day of mourning was called, and, at least in Salem “minute guns” were fired for a half an hour at the North Bridge.

The most bizarre and even macabre of these expressions were mock funerals held for commerce held in coastal communities of Massachusetts and the District of Maine in December 1808 and January 1809, and from these and other fragmentary literary expressions would emerge the association of the Sea Serpent with the Embargo of 1807 in September of 1817. On January 10, 1809, the *New England Palladium* of Boston reported that on the anniversary of the Embargo’s passage, December 22, 1808, in Portland, in the district of Maine, a number

³³⁰ Walter W. Jennings, *American Embargo, 1807-1809*, 139;
New England Palladium, February 24, 1809;
 Walter W. Jennings, *American Embargo, 1807-1809*, 154

protesters created a spectacle in which they put a “long boat stern foremost on a car,” modeling it as a “ship in distress and disarray with loose rigging flapping in the breeze, its stern and quarter-boards carried the name, O-grab-me, the derisive, transposed name for the embargo.” They hitched horses to the front of the disheveled ship, and all “fell in behind a marching band playing doleful music.” A crowd of unemployed masters and mechanics followed the vehicle, and, when they reached the battery, an unnamed “but popular ship captain” spoke to the crowd, “in burlesque fashion,” of “how easy it was to starve old England by shutting down the American merchant marine.” The protest response from the crowd followed the form of “a spirited rendition of an improvised psalm,” and afterward, they launched the ship, a kind of *Flying Dutchman* to express their sense of the forlorn state of commerce in New England.³³¹ There was a similar spectacle in Newburyport, Massachusetts, close to the anniversary of the Embargo, December 23, 1808, in which bells rang at sunrise, flags were hung at half-mast, and “minute guns were fired.” The tocsin, later augmented by cannon fire, was repeated at noon and four in the afternoon, when “a procession of sailors” wearing crepe armbands marched to a muffled drum. After them and down the street, followed a dismantled ship, that carried a tolling bell and inverted cans capping each mast, “signifying a lack of grog.” “‘Death to Commerce,’ appeared on a flag” and “‘O grab me’ was painted on the bows of the vessel.”³³² These spectacles, according to

³³¹ James Ellis. *Ruinous and Unhappy War*, 38;
Walter W. Jennings, *American Emboargo, 1807-1809*, 136

³³² Walter W. Jennings, *American Emboargo, 1807-1809*, 136

David Waldstreicher, were expressions of the anti-celebratory position Federalists took in relation to Republican celebrations during the first fifteen years of the nineteenth-century, and can be seen alongside Federalist satire, accounts of mock celebrations and “literary black face.”³³³ Because of the Napoleonic Wars, in the 1790s, New England had flourished, but after 1801 and most particularly after 1806, New Englanders found that “international conflict also led to controversies over national policy, like Jefferson’s embargo, that highlighted the distinctiveness of Yankee political economy.”³³⁴

The *Salem Gazette* used the inverted form of embargo twice, once as a contemporary reference in 1808, elaborating on a story run previously about a vessel that was captured “from Crowninshield Wharf by Gen. Ograbme, (as they call him in Boston.)”³³⁵ “O Grab Me” appeared in the *Salem Gazette* again on August 19, 1817 as the title of an article about the “Fishermen of Gloucester,” the story ran in the [Portland] *Gazette*, of Portland, district of Maine on August 26, and in the *Northern Whig* in Hudson, New York, on September 2. The fishermen of Gloucester, the article began, remembered the Embargo of 1807-9, and so they named the “Sea Monster, which now haunts their shores,” EMBARGO or OGRABME. The threat the Sea Serpent may pose to ships in 1817 is dismissed with hyperbole, for the writer observes that the Sea Serpent “is a very *modest* monster, and confines itself to its own element and sphere. So he speculates that the Sea

³³³ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820*, 207-212

³³⁴ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 252

³³⁵ *Salem Gazette*, 7 Oct. 1808

Serpent may be the embargo in “its *reptile* or *tad pole* state.” The 1807 Embargo “on the contrary,” was “more dangerous and voracious” because it “swallowed whole ships, stock and fluke, with large and rich cargoes” and “found the wide Atlantic too narrow to sport in, and sometimes became a *land animal*.” Once on land, the Embargo, “like Pharaoh’s frogs, crept into the innermost recesses of our bedchambers” so, the writer effuses, “let our coast, then, be surrounded by myriads of these Sea Snakes, rather than by one of Jefferson’s *Embargoes!*”³³⁶

The article is an example of regional literature and political expression, it demonstrates the expansive terms of New England political rhetoric, and how such writing contributed to the extension of symbols from political vituperation into the realm of imaginative literary creativity. In nearly all such expressions the Embargo is the tenor of the metaphoric expression, and the Sea Serpent is subordinate to it, and so it is the vehicle. The expression is regional because it draws its meaning directly from the historical context of the resentment New Englanders felt about the Embargo. Only New Englanders showed any sign of distress or opposition to the policy.

When the Madison Administration was inaugurated in 1809, the navy was “just a few cruisers and a large force of gunboats” that were constantly idle. Jefferson had come to rely on the gunboat system so much that if it “should prove to be a failure, nothing would be left of the navy except a few frigates and sloops

³³⁶ *Salem Gazette*, 19 Aug. 1817;

John W. Boynton, *Great Sea-serpent, Upon the Coast of New-England in 1817*, 16

which could hardly keep the sea in the event of war with England.”³³⁷ And, the War of 1812 was less than three years away.

On the eve of the war, after a “decade of Republican hostility,” had weakened the navy, it still consisted of 17 ships, seven of which were frigates. Every American ship carried more guns than it was rated for, and extra crewmen, a common practice in the age of sail. American frigates could be accurately called “superfrigates,” because though they were rated as carrying 44 guns, they could carry 56 to 60 guns, the British frigates were rated only for 38. The three American “superfrigates” *President*, *United States*, and *Constitution* were “capable of outfighting and outsailing other ships in their class and of outrunning anything larger.”³³⁸ The morale of the navy, in spite of its political problems, was high, and men were “trained to perfect their skills.”³³⁹ After the surrender of the British *HMS Guerriere* in combat against the USS *Constitution* on June 19, 1812 and that of the HMS *Macedonian*, to the USS *Constitution* on October 25, 1812, the British were truly shocked and dismayed at the strength of the American frigates. British people were in a “desponding condition” because in that year, they had “a deficient harvest, bad weather, wheat at nearly five dollars a bushel, and the American supply about to be cut off . . .” therefore, “ . . . the loss of the *Guerriere* assumed portentous dimensions.”³⁴⁰

³³⁷ Henry Adams. *History of the United States in the Administrations of James Madison*, 118

³³⁸ Donald Hickey. *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, (IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2012): 90, 96

³³⁹ Donald Hickey. *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 90, 96

³⁴⁰ Henry Adams. *History of the United States in the Administrations of James Madison*, 624

In the last decade of the eighteenth-century and in the first fifteen years of the nineteenth, the United States faced the depredations of Britain and France, the two great leviathans of the Atlantic. By 1812, the slighting of American sovereignty at sea was accompanied by the thwarting of American, and specifically, Republican territorial ambitions in the form of British assistance to the Indians, and in particular, to the pan-Indian movement of Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa, also called the Prophet. To secure respect for its sovereignty and aspirations, whether maritime or territorial, the United States had to meet force with force.

After the War of 1812 was won, Americans and New Englanders in particular, through imaginative writing, could depict power in terms of their own choosing instead of remembering power as they had experienced it in Jefferson's Embargo and the War of 1812, and in particular, the British blockade of their coast. Like the Embargo, the War of 1812 showed that the interests of New Englanders in the Early Republic were distinctive in relation to the rest of the nation. "The most persistent, organized, and vociferous opposition" to the war "arose from that oldest region of the country—New England." In spite of the widespread dissent against the war in New England, the most fair characterization of their stance in the war is ambivalence. Though the region made a large contribution to the war, "much of the financing and a substantial portion of the army and navy came from New England," and yet the history of the war is incompletely told without reference to dissent and protest.

Their dissent was consistent. New Englanders did not support the war at first and then become jaded. Their opposition was prominent enough as a cultural feature to give rise to a perception in the rest of the nation, and even in Britain, that “the region as a whole rejected the war policies of the national government.”³⁴¹ The British were so confident in the Anglophilia of New England’s mercantile and political establishments, that they believed most New Englanders would not fight them. They favored New England trade in 1813 by granting licenses exclusively to ships coming from New England ports, and did not blockade the New England coast until 1814.

New England’s stance in the War of 1812 is best defined as ambivalent because though a majority opposed the war, a substantial minority supported the federal government. The war-opposing Federalists were better organized than the Republicans were as a political force, and by 1813, they controlled all the state governments in the region except in Vermont. New England ambivalence did not respect social classes, it was expressed from the top down and from the bottom up.³⁴²

At the war’s beginning, June 23, 1812, businesses in New England closed for the day, flags were lowered to half-mast, and some were “displayed upside down.” In Augusta, Maine, U.S. soldiers and citizens confronted each other about whether or not a flag pole should be cut down or left intact with the flag left at half-mast,

³⁴¹ James Ellis, *Ruinous and Unhappy War: New England in the War of 1812*, 1-2

³⁴² James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic*, 271-272

and James Madison was hanged in effigy. Several communities held referenda on the war and attending peace conventions; in Maine, Buckstown, and Deer Isle voted to send delegations to an August peace convention in Castine. In Wells, four men approved of the war and 246 did not, the same majority supported sending a memorial of their disapproval to President Madison. In Massachusetts proper, a special meeting in Gloucester “adopted a statement ‘on the portentous crisis’” and chose delegates for an anticipated convention in Ipswich that would “consider the ‘awful and alarming situation . . .’” A July town meeting in Yarmouth, Cape Cod, called a committee “to write a protesting memorial to the president.” Later, most of the towns on Cape Cod sent delegations to a Barnstable County “peace convention held in early August . . .” In Boston, the *Columbian Centinel* reported on July 18, that three to four thousand people met at Faneuil Hall, where they “passed antiwar resolutions, contending the war ‘is necessarily to be deprecated, as it tends to impair the attachment of the people to the union of these states.’”³⁴³

One of the incidents of the war that became associated with the Sea Serpent was the Connecticut Blue Lights, in November and December, 1813. In late spring and early summer of that year, the British blockaded port areas of New York and Nantucket, with adjoining Sounds, one of which became a British naval station

³⁴³ James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic*, page 27
James Ellis, *Ruinous and Unhappy War*, 1-2, 7;

commanded by Sir Thomas Hardy. The blockade was “stringent, and its efficiency was proved by the failure of [Stephen] Decatur’s efforts to evade it.”³⁴⁴

At that time, Decatur was commanding a squadron consisting of the frigate *USS United States*, a refitted *Macedonian*, and the sloop of war *USS Hornet*. On May 29, at Montauk Point, Decatur’s squadron confronted a British squadron sent by Hardy. Hardy sent a squadron to harass Decatur’s, and so Decatur was compelled to harbor in New London, Connecticut. As the British squadron “closed upon the harbor,” Decatur, fearing for the ships’ safety, withdrew into the river, five miles above the town, and “took every precaution to repel an attack.” The British watched New London all that summer, and Decatur looked for the approach of winter, when he might escape to the sea.³⁴⁵

In December, 1813, “the country was scandalized” when an official letter from Decatur to the Secretary of the Navy was made public. It stated that on December 20, when the weather “promised an opportunity for this squadron to get to sea,” it was “said on shore” that Decatur’s squadron was going to attempt an escape. That evening, “two blue lights were burned on both points of the harbor’s mouth as signals to the enemy . . . they have, by signals and otherwise, instantaneous information of our movements.” Decatur could not prove that the blue lights were intended to inform the enemy of his intention, in spite of his making many efforts to find the culprits. In New London “ill feeling was roused,”

³⁴⁴ Henry Adams, *History of the United States in the Administrations of James Madison*, 813-814

³⁴⁵ Henry Adams, *History of the United States in the Administrations of James Madison*, 813-814;

and the Blue Lights remained “a subject of extreme delicacy” with the townspeople.³⁴⁶

Furthermore, *Niles’ Register* called the incident the “blackest treason,” Connecticut Federalists “demanded a Congressional investigation to clear the air,” but such an undertaking was futile because there really was no way of ascertaining the truth. By then, “blue light Federalist” had already entered the political lexicon, and one Federalist observed that it was already an “ornament or embellishment to a speech, such as Old Tory, British gold, Henryism, &c.”³⁴⁷ The incident, colored deeply by Decatur’s suspicions, gave rise to the appellation, “blue light Federalist,” another of LaCroix’s political stage whispers in print.

Decatur’s stage whisper proved still resonant in 1818, when the *Yankee*, a Boston weekly paper ran an unsigned piece about “some folks” who have a “*notion* that if the Sea Serpent was caught and cut open, his *lights* would be found to be *blue*,” thus proving that “*this Serpent . . . exhibited the blue lights during the war.*” This is a literary fragment, a rudimentary idea that has the potential to develop at least one and even two narratives in two separate time periods, because the author concludes that if the notion could be proved, “it would be worth millions.”³⁴⁸

As we have seen, the ambivalence of New England in the war prompted the British to favor the region in their trade policies. When British frigates cruised off

³⁴⁶ Henry Adams, *History of the United States in the Administrations of James Madison*, 813-814; Stephen Decatur, *Niles’ Register*, Vol. 302, in Henry Adams, *History of the United States in the Administrations of James Madison*, 814

³⁴⁷ Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 264

³⁴⁸ *The Yankee*, 27 Aug. 1818

Boston Harbor, they did so to watch for ships of war, not “to interfere with neutral commerce.” New England disaffection with the union resembled neutrality, and the British hoped “that the Eastern states might elect to remain neutral” in the conflict. By these appearances, New Englanders gained “the profitable but invidious distinction of being treated as friends by the national enemy.”³⁴⁹ Still, the New England states had not formally declared neutrality, and because of their refusal to do this, the British extended their blockade to the New England coast in the spring of 1814. Walter Muir Whitehill, (1905-1978), director of the Boston Athenaeum between 1946 and 1973, writing for the Peabody Museum in Salem in 1939, argued that the blockade itself is rarely the subject of historical writing because in spite of its effectiveness, it was silent. “Its mere existence inflicted a direct material loss to the American people a hundredfold greater than the entire American navy was able to inflict on Great Britain from the beginning to the end of its gallant career in this war.” Henry Edward Napier’s journal, now in the possession of the Peabody Essex Museum, was one of the “few known and continuous accounts of the blockade” as the British levied it and New Englanders experienced it.³⁵⁰

In April, 1814, the blockade extended as far as New Brunswick, and by May 6, 1814, Napier’s ship, the HMS *Nymphe*, 38, entered Boston Bay “in company with a good assortment of other naval vessels,” and remained off the Massachusetts

³⁴⁹ James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic*, 272

³⁵⁰ Walter Muir Whitehill, Introduction to *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier, Lieutenant in H.M.S. Nymphe*, (Salem: Peabody Museum, 1939), v, vii, x, xi

coast for three months in which “the blockading squadron ruled the coast.”³⁵¹ The squadron seized several coasting vessels as they tried to put to sea, and Napier recorded that “a good number of these were either burned or ransomed.” New England responses to the blockade showed ambivalence, as Quakers in Nantucket, Whitehill tells us, “openly licked British boots,” while Salem and other communities formed defensive militias. Blockading British vessel crews “expected green peas, fat cattle, recent newspapers from the shore, and got them.” New Englanders, Henry Napier observed on June 9, 1814, “hate the war on their own account, hate the war because it prevents their making money, and like the English as a spendthrift loves a rich old wife; the sooner we are gone, the better.” On the same day, the *Nymphe* was joined by the HMS *Bulwark*, and both were standing towards Beverly as they sent boats into the harbor just north of Salem, “chased several vessels on shore, [and] burned one.”³⁵²

From May to August, 1814, Napier wrote about the career of his vessel and others participating in the blockade. British vessels spent most of their time observing the coast and chasing vessels, once, they even chased two of their own. In May, Napier and his comrades maneuvered in cold temperatures and dangerous fog, which they attributed to “endless banks of sand, which extend in a continual and successive chain . . . in short through the whole coast to the northward till they

³⁵¹ Walter Muir Whitehill, Introduction to *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier, Lieutenant in H.M.S. Nymphe*, v, vii, x, xi

³⁵² Walter Muir Whitehill, Introduction to *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier, Lieutenant in H.M.S. Nymphe*, xii; Henry Napier, diary entry, 9 June, 1814, in *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier, Lieutenant in H.M.S. Nymphe*, 23;

join the Great Newfoundland Bank.” From the *Nymphe* Napier synchronized his watch by the town clock in Gloucester, and found the city’s appearance “pretty” and the surrounding countryside to be “rather romantic.”³⁵³

On May 29, Napier observed strengthening defenses; at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, he observed that Fort Independence appeared “very strong,” Fort Kittery “could rake any ship engaging it,” and that another fortification on Pearce’s Island was “lately put into repair.” The people seemed to be in a “great fright and all the militia concentrated there expecting an attack.” He reflected a little more in the same entry on the attitudes of New Englanders he had encountered, writing that “all the people [are] exceedingly discontented with the war and all join in abusing the government.” He concluded that their highly localized concerns about defense and contempt for the federal government had nothing to do with any special sense of community; it was the product of “self, the great ruling principle, more powerful with Yankees than any people I ever saw. Begin with a dollar and proceed to any amount, you may always buy a Yankee in almost any rank and station!” He concluded also, from his observation of New England, that the character of the emergent culture and society in the United States was corrupt, effusing “venality flourishes in the utmost luxuriance!”³⁵⁴

³⁵³ Henry Napier, diary entry, 9 June, 1814, in *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier, Lieutenant in H.M.S. Nymphe*, 10-12

³⁵⁴ Henry Napier, diary entry, 9 June, 1814, in *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier, Lieutenant in H.M.S. Nymphe*, 18

Napier's observation of the operation of self-interest is not a hollow bit of complaining. In spite its ambivalence, New England was exceptional in this period for a righteously felt and loudly bruited dissent against the war, and for playing both parties to the conflict toward the objective of profit. Henry Adams argues that there was great prosperity in New England, because farming and manufacturing were increasing there. Southern states, he tells us, ran a six million-dollar trade deficit with New England alone, and New England banks drew "not less than half a million dollars every month from the South." A Connecticut Federalist, quoted in *The Palladium* on July 15, 1814, sensed "the retributive hand of justice" in this situation, because the "calamities of war" should have been felt more sharply "in that section of the Union which has so rashly and so unmercifully persisted in their determination to commence hostilities." Though New Englanders' smuggling had prompted the passage of another embargo in 1813, even that policy did not disturb the dynamic of increasing prosperity in the region. The 1813 American embargo and the 1814 British blockade brought wealth "to her [New England] alone."³⁵⁵

Military historian Donald Hickey, whose study has focused on New England's stance and problems in the war, argues otherwise, that New Englanders suffered from the war, embargo and blockade. It is true that many individual New Englanders found prosperity in the shadow of war; farmers "fared well," and illicit trade, privateering and manufacturing were lucrative. Organizations and people who secured government contracts, Paul Revere and Eli Whitney to name two, also

³⁵⁵ Henry Adams, *History of the United States in the Administrations of James Madison*, 916

prospered. Still, the region's geographical isolation worked against it, because "New England was too far east to profit from the big army contracts, and few regulars were stationed" there. New England's commercial and fishing operations proved to be a liability rather than an asset in the war, because she was "too dependent on the sea to prosper in any war with a great naval power." By fall, 1813, there were 250 ships in Boston harbor, and "people were moving out of the city to look for work elsewhere." In the last months of 1814, "it cost as much as 75% of a ship's value to insure it for a voyage." Property values in Newbury went down 37%, the number of people seeking public assistance in the town increased from 20 to 224.³⁵⁶

As 1814 progressed, New Englanders' sense of looming danger intensified when in September, the British invaded and occupied all the area of Maine east of the Penobscot River and Bay. The motivation for the aggression in New England was the same as that for the attack on Washington and Baltimore, "to rectify" American aggression on the Upper Canadian frontier by "lopping away" any U.S. territory they could isolate. On July 5, the British took control of the disputed Moose Island handily when the 86 American military personnel capitulated. In late August, Lieutenant-General John C. Sherbrooke, the British governor of Nova Scotia, was ferried down the Penobscot, arriving at Castine with a force of 2,500 men on September 1. Castine's American garrison rapidly "blew up their fort and dispersed." Even though the number of men living in the region "capable of

³⁵⁶ Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 231, 231 n93

bearing arms was at that time about twelve-thousand . . . they offered no resistance to the British troops.”³⁵⁷ The people of Maine submitted to British authority, men took loyalty oaths to King George, and “one-hundred miles of Massachusetts sea-coast passed quietly under the dominion of the King of England.”³⁵⁸

With eastern Maine secured, British authorities seized all public and some private property in the region, and the inhabitants were given the choice of “taking an oath to keep the peace or of leaving the area.” Castine became a British port of entry, and a “resort town for British military officers on leave.” There was no show of public discontent in eastern Maine with the British occupation, indeed the *Essex Register* of Salem, Massachusetts reported that some inhabitants were downright joyful.³⁵⁹ In Washington, the War Department asked Massachusetts Governor Caleb Strong to muster militia and provide funding for an expedition to retake eastern Maine, but as the state’s resources were “stretched thin, Strong refused to cooperate.”³⁶⁰

Because of the occupation, smuggling on the Canadian frontier increased “dramatically in 1814.” Such illicit trade was lucrative to smugglers, but damaging to the United States because it “drained specie from American banks, and put food in the mouths of British soldiers.” Not long after its capture in September, Castine took part in the trend as a port of entry. There, “Swedish vessels ran immense

³⁵⁷ Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*,

³⁵⁸ Henry Adams, *History of the United States in the Administrations of James Madison*, 974-975

³⁵⁹ Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 195, n67

³⁶⁰ Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 195

quantities of British-made goods . . . up the Penobscot River to Hampden,” where they could be distributed more widely in New England. Such was the ambivalent fortune of New England in its experience of British imperial power as invasion and occupation.

At that time, there was much public debate about the possibility that New England, dependent as its prosperity had been on shipping and commerce from the 1780s, and given its “strong Federalist orientation, might choose to detach itself from . . . the young nation and negotiate a separate peace with Great Britain.” The presence of the Royal Navy’s frigates patrolling the Atlantic “within eyesight of New England’s coastal towns,” the occupation of “vast swaths” of Maine, and the August assault on Washington D.C. reminded Americans, and particularly New Englanders, that the war arose from a “global system of alliances and hostilities.” From its beginning, the organized dissenters in New England saw the conflict in international and ideological terms, and expressed the expansive view by using transatlantic points of argument. They understood the conflict not as a question of loyalty to the nation, but a question of loyalty to its meaning in the choice of who, of the two leviathans across the ocean, was the truer friend to the United States—Britain the “monarchical aggressor” or France, “a bloody morass of Terror followed by Directory followed by absolute empire.”³⁶¹

³⁶¹ Alison L. LaCroix, “A Singular and Awkward War: The Transatlantic Context of the Hartford Convention,” *American Nineteenth-Century History*, 6 1, (March 2005), 5-8

In New England writing, in and out of print, Bonaparte was diabolical, “the great destroyer,’ the ‘monster of human depravity,’ and ‘the arch-Fiend who has long been the curse & Scourge of the European world.’”³⁶² One of the wellsprings of New England ambivalence in the War of 1812 was the regional perception of Bonaparte and the sense that Republican politicians lavished the French despot with sycophantic admiration. Anti-Bonaparte feeling in New England, like the wonder at the spectacle of the Sea Serpent, was expressed in metaphorical, mythic and religious terms, all of which invoke power.

In spite of the vituperation leveled at Napoleon Bonaparte in New England writing before 1817, only Frederick W.A.S. Brown, author of “A Valedictory Poem. Address to the Sea Serpent,” 1819, saw any semblance between the wonder and terror of the Sea Serpent and the literary effusions in previous years about the French emperor, “. . . but all confess, indeed, thou art, like fam’d Napoleon Bonaparte, a wonder rare.” In addition, where the Sea Serpent was, in “Jonathan’s” estimation, “the mighty mogul of the Sea,” Brown questions whether the lot of the serpent may change,

“Do Serpents, from a low condition,
Become puff’d up with vain ambition
And lawless sway?
It may be so; and that thou art
The vain, ambitious Bonaparte

³⁶² Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 256 n4

Of Boston Bay.”³⁶³

In addition to the idea that the nation’s leadership was serving the interests of France before America, New England Federalists and dissenters against the war believed that the policy of war favored Republican, Southern and Western, interests at the expense of New England interests, and this was particularly evident in the short-lived embargo of 1813 and in the Republican aspiration to conquer Canada, a campaign they believed would “do more harm than good.” The best summation of the Federalist case against the war was that it was “a costly, futile and partisan venture . . . likely to produce little good and much evil,” and the only way to end the conflict was to oppose it. Though all Federalists opposed the war, none went so far, in the ways of policy, spectacle, literature, advocacy, and political maneuvering on all levels of government, as those in New England.³⁶⁴

The most extreme Federalist positions in New England, published in the *Salem Gazette* and the *Hartford Courant* among others, were calls for a separate peace with England, for Massachusetts to sequester federal taxes, and for inviting “neighboring states to sign ‘a convention of alliance, amity and commerce.’”

³⁶³ Frederick W.A.S. Brown, “A valedictory poem addressed to the inhabitants of Rainsford’s, George’s, Gallop’s, Light House, and Deer Islands, in Boston harbour,” (Second Edition, Boston: True and Weston, 1819. Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, *Early American Imprints, Series II*, No. 47440), 47

³⁶⁴ Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 257

Though these positions do not represent the thinking of a majority, they were not marginalized in New England discourse.³⁶⁵

Accordingly, in autumn, 1814, Caleb Strong and the Massachusetts legislature drafted a report recommending a convention of New England states, first, to strengthen local institutions for regional defense, and second, because the Constitution had proved inadequate for securing “equal rights and benefits” for New England in the Republic. In mid-October, the Connecticut legislature’s report advocated participation in such a convention, and justified it by referring to the dangers of the war, the federal government’s withdrawal of military and financial support, and the resulting heavy burden of taxation on the people for local defense. Rhode Island followed suit, and its “concern for defense was no less pronounced” than those of Massachusetts and Connecticut. New Hampshire and Vermont had been invited to send delegates to the convention, but refused to do so because their own Federalist leadership was moderate. They were not entirely absent, however, as two counties in each state chose representatives to attend. Like the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the Hartford Convention was held secretly, which accorded with “tradition, but [was] . . . unquestionably a tactical mistake.”³⁶⁶

In spite of the stridency of the rhetoric in the months and even years preceding it, the Hartford Convention favored moderation in its report. Though the convention’s secession debates are lost, New England Federalists might have been

³⁶⁵ Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 269; 269 n95

³⁶⁶ Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 277; James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic*, 297

taken more seriously in a national context if they had “reached such a sane and common-sense decision without the preliminary of calling a convention in time of war.”³⁶⁷

The legislatures in Massachusetts and Connecticut approved of the Report and sent emissaries to deliver it in Washington, among whom were Massachusetts merchant and later Sea Serpent observer Thomas Handasyd Perkins, with Harrison Gray Otis leading. En route there, the delegation learned of the victory at the Battle of New Orleans, and the news of peace that followed closely behind it. T. H. Perkins stated that, as far as he was concerned, his mission was “suspended” when he heard of the victory at New Orleans.³⁶⁸ Winfield Scott wrote to James Monroe in 1815, that the “grievance deputies” of Massachusetts and Connecticut “afforded a fine Subject of jest and merriment to men of all parties.” Madison ignored the emissaries, and so they spent the remainder of their time in Washington in trying to secure reimbursement for their states’ military expenditures.³⁶⁹

The Hartford Convention was a meaningful expression of regionalism in the context of nationalism because, as Donald Hickey wrote, it was a “triumph for moderation,” and did not take among its final positions the policy of secession. David Waldstreicher observed that many historians treat regionalism and nationalism as “mutually exclusive phenomena,” and that from such a perspective, “the regional perspective detracts from the nationalist one, and mature nationalism

³⁶⁷ James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic*, 298

³⁶⁸ Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 279

³⁶⁹ Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 279, 279 n175

subsumes fugitive expressions of national identity.”³⁷⁰ Waldstreicher argues for a more continuous relationship between regionalism and nationalism, asserting that regionalism “contributed to nationalism,” even if it “ultimately weakened” the union.

The association of the Sea Serpent with the Hartford Convention, as with the Embargo of 1807-9, occurred in fragmentary expressions, and only in the first two years of the phenomenon. Their metaphoric structure is identical to that observed in the “O Grab Me” article run by the *Salem Gazette* in September 1817, in which the event, this time the Hartford Convention, is the tenor of the expression, and the Sea Serpent, subordinated to it, is the vehicle. “Curiosity,” a writer observed in the *Eastern Argus* of Portland, Maine, “appears to be awake respecting these terrific monsters, who of late make their appearance off Boston Harbor . . . three have already been seen,” and many “sober reflecting persons” believe that “twenty-three more will shortly appear.” The writer concludes that the mother and two small sea serpents reported from Gloucester by Capt. Webber in “Sea Serpent and Brood,” are “only the evil spirits of the Hartford Convention,” now “compelled to leave their abodes on land, they have sought an asylum in the deep.” Among the toasts reported by the Republican-leaning *National Aegis* of Worcester, Massachusetts at a celebration at which there was the discharge of cannons and an “Abraham Lincoln, Esq. presided at table.” The celebrants invoked the day, their country, the memory of revolutionary heroes, George Washington, “formed in

³⁷⁰ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 248

nature's finest mould," the "Sage of Quincey," John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson; they toasted James Madison and James Monroe, they told *Republicans*, in essence, they told themselves, not to give up the ship, and then called democracy "a strong and splendid fortress." Later, they called Federalism the "*Strong ally of Strong Government*, and the inveterate enemy of Republican policy . . . beware of the contaminating influence of its counsels." The next toast was to the "*The Sea Serpent and the Hartford Convention, two huge monsters*," the Sea Serpent was a monster "on sight," the convention was monstrous upon contemplation, "may Naturalists and Historians do justice to both."³⁷¹

Between 1789 and 1800, the Federalist Party represented and served New England interests, they maintained trade ties with Britain, they formed the navy and built frigates to protect ocean-going commerce. In this situation, prevailing in the administration of John Adams, one can see that "any region," with "sufficient control or influence over the federal government, can create an ideal situation," and thus a regional political subculture "can conflate regional and national goals."³⁷² It is the assertion of this study, that this was New England's position prior to the Jefferson Administration, and this apparent conflation of national and regional goals of the Federalist Era persisted in the New England mind.

Waldstreicher's example of nationalist regionalism is New England, which, while its

³⁷¹ "Sea Serpents and the Hartford Convention," *Eastern Argus*, [Portland, Maine], 28 Jul. 1818; "INDEPENDENCE!" *National Aegis*, 3 Jul. 1818

³⁷² David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 248

inhabitants did not necessarily see it as “America writ small,” they did “at least define themselves as its [that is, the nation’s] saving remnant.”³⁷³

Regionalist expressions from New England darkened in the period of the Jefferson Administration because the political fortunes of the Federalists had changed, and New Englanders sensed a break between their own interests and the professed policies of the Republicans. The territorial expansion of the nation created yet more regions within the U.S., and because “the nation and its regions were in such flux, one day’s happy identification of region and nation could be the next day’s intractable political dilemma.” Waldstreicher’s main claim is regionalism in this period, regardless of its source, is situational and contingent in nature.³⁷⁴ New England culture and behavior from the revolution to 1815 adheres to this model. New Englanders projected into their image of the southern planter, Republican positions that they believed to be contemptible, chief among them were Republican support for “democracy and the French Revolution” and the Republican tolerance of slavery. While New England Federalists “held no patent on antislavery notions in New England,” their critique was designed to continue the conflation “of party and region: to symbolically place all the nation’s sins, (including the Republican opposition) ‘mostly in the southern and middle states.’” Their regionalism was an argument not about themselves, but about the nature of the nation.

³⁷³ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 248, 251

³⁷⁴ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 249

When the Louisiana Purchase was added to the national territory, New Englanders sensed that their power in the Republic would be reduced; New England orators, we are told, blamed the South and Virginia, and believed the acquisition to be a “scheme that would lead to New England’s subjection . . .” Campaigns to alter the three-fifths compromise in the Constitution and attempts to find ways of delaying the admission of new states to the union followed in 1804, only in New England.³⁷⁵

For the entire decade afterward, as we have seen in this chapter, New England Federalists imagined themselves and their region as a “loyal but aggrieved northern America” whose contours were unclear because they were constantly trying to bring New York into their “northern or eastern political fold.” Though they did not define themselves as the nation, they saw themselves as defending their region from the imposition of southern slavery; in their minds, slavery was not just an institution of the south, it defined the entire region. The Embargo helped them “flesh out this picture” of resistance against southern despotism “with an international dimension,” and even the Republicans in New England were said to be “functionaries of the French interest.” The “temper of disunion” observed by John Quincy Adams in 1808 is defined by Waldstreicher as “really a defense of New England (and America) against narrow regionalists who cloaked their southern agenda in nationalism.”³⁷⁶

³⁷⁵ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 253

³⁷⁶ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 254

The opposition to the War of 1812, in terms of regionalist expression was instrumental to New England Federalists in constructing “a mythic South and West that possessed no real claims to the legacy of the Revolution,” a revolution whose liberties were, as defined by them, rooted in Britain and growing in no other place than New England.³⁷⁷

The Hartford Convention was an expression of regional nationalism in New England, not just because the delegates stopped short of secession in its objectives, but because the amendments proposed were for the national constitution, not part of even a sub-national regional compact between the New England states alone. Donald Hickey observed that “in the rush of events at the end of the war,” the convention and the objectives in the Report were not interpreted as expressions of Waldstreicher’s national regionalism, or moderation, at all. Anxiety about union loomed up, like the Sea Serpent, into public consciousness in New England and the nation, first as the secessionist impulse before the convention itself, then afterward, as a dreaded expression of discontent and an opportunity for public dialogue about the nature of the national compact. The convention became, in the final and national context of February 1815, a farce. The Sea Serpent phenomenon as experienced between 1817 and 1825 presented a curious analogue with the events of the winter, 1814-15, and the dynamic was recognized in the literature generated by it.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁷ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 260

³⁷⁸ Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 280

The backdrop of the literary response of the Sea Serpent was not the war and the convention, but their aftermath, and the relentlessly calm and objective language of the sighting reports. “In time of peace, when men’s minds are not agitated with politics and battles in the manner they have been . . . it is certainly desirable to improve the *opportunities* for prosecuting the study of nature,” David Humphreys commented in his open correspondence on the Sea Serpent to Joseph Banks in September, 1817.³⁷⁹ The communities on and adjacent to the Massachusetts shore from which the reports came, among them Salem, home of the two newspapers that would write the most about the Sea Serpent, would never again know the kind of prosperity they experienced between 1790 and 1812. Ipswich, Newburyport, Salem, Marblehead, and Beverly, did not recover from the war’s effects until they involved themselves in manufacturing.³⁸⁰ Other ports outside New England served the nation better as “places of exchange between the West and Europe, ports like New Orleans, Baltimore, and New York, with the Erie Canal, had such obvious advantages over Boston and Salem that it was difficult to see how Massachusetts could survive as a commercial community.”³⁸¹

The Sea Serpent entered these changing communities on the Penobscot River and New England coast, and those who observed reported the creature’s characteristics and their reaction, for the most part, without characterizing the creature. The *Boston Gazette* titled its article, which was reprinted from the *Essex*

³⁷⁹ David Humphreys, *Letters of the Hon. David Humphreys . . .*, 31

³⁸⁰ James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic, 1776-1850*, 304

³⁸¹ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860*, 213, <http://archive.org/details/maritimehistory01morigoog> Internet Archive, 9-2013

Register of Salem, "Something New." "Yesterday, information was received in this town from Gloucester; of the appearance of an unusual fish or serpent in their harbour . . . the fish had been seen for several days and that it was first discovered by the fishermen." In Providence, the *Patriot* reported that "there has lately appeared in the harbour of Gloucester (Mass) a monstrous animal of the serpent species, which has attracted much attention," and the *Hartford Courant* opened its first report with the remark that "the appearance in Gloucester (Cape Ann) harbor of an uncommon *Sea Animal*, has been the topic of consternation and wonderment for several days past." Only the *Portsmouth Oracle* suggested a specific identity for the Sea Serpent when it called the creature "this Leviathan" in its one-paragraph summary of a report from the *Salem Gazette*.³⁸²

Leviathan's words of July 11, 1818, "Know ye, who live from east to west, that I with sovereign pow'r am blessed," are an expression of joy in peace and in the agency of a recognized and respected citizenship, whether on the frontier, in settled land, or on the sea. The two un-subdued leviathans of the first fifteen years of the nineteenth-century were gone. The Sea Serpent seemed at first to carry with him the sublime dimensions of the world that had just become history, and this is why the writing about the creature, whether journalistic or literary, amounts to a collection of texts of power and aspiration, imperial, national, and personal. In the 1820s and Antebellum Era, writing about the Sea Serpent would turn more toward

³⁸² "Something New. SALEM, AUG. 16--," *Boston Gazette*, 18 Aug. 1817; "SEA SERPENT.," *Providence Patriot*, 23 Aug. 1817; A "SEA SERPENT," *Hartford Courant*, [Hartford, Connecticut], 26 Aug. 1817; "The Sea Serpent.," *Portsmouth Oracle*, 6 Sept. 1817

recreation, idealism and more personal forms of power, right and human agency, forms of power that were challenged by the existence of slavery in the United States.

CHAPTER 4

THE SEA SERPENT IN THE CLAUDE MIRROR OF FICTION

“Mr. Gray carried usually with him on these tours a plano-convex mirror of about four inches diameter on a black foil, and bound up like a pocket book. A glass of this sort is perhaps the best and most convenient substitute for a camera obscura, of any thing that has hitherto been invented, and may be had of any optician.” *The Poems and Letters of Thomas Gray*, 1820.³⁸³

Bold words begin a story written in the form of a Sea Serpent report, dated July 18, 1818, from New York City: “MY DEAR SIR, I have made a great discovery;-- the Sea Serpent is the ANACONDA of the Ocean!” The story, which “Samuel Simpleton” in Boston called “a pleasant effort of the imagination . . .” was interesting enough for the editor’s comment, but not important enough to run in his paper, *The Idiot, or, Invisible Rambler*. Where the Sea Serpent’s existence was scientifically unverified, soon after the August 1817 events, and over three proceeding decades, the apparent Sea Serpent became actualized in a constellation of exhibits, images, theatrical presentations, and narratives.³⁸⁴

In 1818, the composite type of the Sea Serpent, so assiduously attended to by news editors and the public, appeared to be dissolving away, corroded by an

³⁸³ Thomas Gray, William Mason, *The Poems and Letters of Thomas Gray*, (London: Dove, 1820), 349, <http://books.google.com/books?id=BsglAAAAQAAJ&dq=Gray's%20memoirs&pg=PP9#v=onepage&q=convex%20mirror%20&f=false> Google Books, 3-2014

³⁸⁴ “Sag-Harbor, Long Island, N.Y.,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, 18 Jul. 1818; “Anaconda of the Ocean,” *The Idiot and Invisible Rambler* [Boston, MA], 25 Jul. 1818

ocean of imaginary writing. Nathan Hale, editor of the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, in an essay signed “A.B.,” noted in September 1818 that the New England experience of the Sea Serpent had changed. Contrasting the 1817 and 1818 Sea Serpent seasons, he noted that by 1818, the public was passive, the reporting possessed a subdued, rational cast, and the sighting and reporting process produced a “solid mass of evidence” collected and “fairly displayed by the Linnaean Society . . .” But, in 1818, with the public mind “heated and prepared for the marvellous, . . . the whale, porpoise and even mackerel” were turned by expectant perception into monsters. And so, in September, 1818, in the wake of the Rich Expedition fiasco, A.B. decided that “we hold much more cheaply the tales and relations of the present season.”³⁸⁵

The preceding chapter dealt with the process by which the Sea Serpent gained its imaginative reality in terms of Marshall McLuhan’s ideas of hot and cold media, in its relation of the sublime to the comic, in a newspaper literature that addressed the regional history of New England. The proceeding chapter will show the cooling Sea Serpent by way of fiction, drama, and art toward the purpose of explaining the Sea Serpent’s relationship to two long-term cultural shifts in Western, Atlantic, American, and New England cultures. The first of these was the changing attitude toward the marine environment of the sea and shore, which went from repulsion to fascination in the Western cultural imagination, a development first perceptible in the seventeenth-century that transformed culture in the

³⁸⁵ A.B., “Communication,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 10 Sept. 1818

eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. The transformation became noticeable in the development of beach-centered recreational practices, a greater interest in the sea by natural historians, and in more writing about the marine environment in a natural theology vein.

The second is set in the context of American and New England commercial and cultural development and has to do with appearance, verisimilitude, multiplication of images and narratives that gave the Sea Serpent a many-faceted existence. Each facet or depiction was made such that in its format and content, it stayed close to the historical reality of the phenomenon, magnifying realism along with fiction, futurism, fantasy, and drama. Sea Serpent reports created a composite type to serve natural history, and a grounding context facilitating the creature's imaginative existence. The Sea Serpent, in its initial appearances in the second week of August, 1817, was at first an unelaborable, "high definition," hot medium, expressed in the printed correspondence of several people and in Salem's *Essex Register* and *Salem Gazette*. The Sea Serpent as a media phenomenon cooled quickly, a process evident in the letters of David Humphreys, and confirmed by the development of the Sea Serpent in imaginative literature, the panorama exhibits and ghost show in New York City, Boston, and Salem between September, 1817 and 1833.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, First MIT Edition, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 22-23

The Sea Serpent frustrated the attempt by practitioners of natural history to make it a banal fact, because in the culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic world, and in the Northern United States particularly, there was an interest on the part of artistic and literary people, and the readers and observers of their works, in multiplying one's perspectives on one object, usually the natural landscape. Two examples of the cultural pattern of multiplying perspectives can be seen in the development of the panorama, "the first true visual 'mass medium,'" which served simultaneously as "an instrument for liberating human vision and for limiting . . . it anew," and the Claude mirror of the eighteenth-century, which, in its ability to improve upon nature, is a metaphor for the Sea Serpent's cooling process. Like the various sources of this chapter, its use involved the "renunciation of sensible dimensions" in favor of "intelligible dimensions [and] . . . in these two senses—sensible and intelligible . . . the Claude mirror is a reductive mirror." Through literary and artistic production, the Sea Serpent became what it never was in science, intelligible. The chief characteristics of a cool medium run parallel to the trend toward creating multiple perspectives of one object, because the cool medium is increasingly subject to elaboration, opens avenues of participation between itself and the audience, and is represented increasingly in ways that lend themselves to the work of several senses at once.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*, First MIT Edition, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 22-23; Mailliet, Arnaud, *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art*, (New York: Zone, 2004), 85-89, 137, 142-143;

Where the imagination had no place in natural history and the discourse of fact that had prompted the collection of Sea Serpent narratives in the first place, the desire to extend it was expressed as the reading of Sea Serpent poetry, futurism and fiction, the viewing of several panorama exhibits, and the production of two harlequinades, and one ghost show between 1817 and 1824. By September 13, 1817, in one of the first poems sightings generated, "The Sea Monster," by Jonathan, in which the Serpent is half a mile long, shaped like "rum-casks swimming in a row," has eyes like "two hells in embryo" and a mail-coat described as a "ball-proof shell . . ." The catalogue, with the exception of the eyes, repeats elements of contemporaneous sighting reports, but Jonathan's suggestions about the Serpent's origin and aspirations are wide-ranging and inconclusive. The Serpent could have been born, "in frozen regions of the Pole," or as "a Mussulman of Turkish breed," or perhaps a European peasant, or someone "flying from justice . . . to this 'asylum of oppress'd humanity.'" Like the contemporary dynamic observed in the letters of David Humphreys, the mythic element, where it occurs, comes in at the level of the Serpent's origin and possible reasons for his appearance, thus what the Serpent might be is richer than what the Serpent appears to be. "The Sea Monster" in its catalogue of suggestions, presents a powerful artistic counter to the reductionist tendencies of the discourse of fact. As such, the poem illustrates the Claude Glass of literary perception of the Sea Serpent phenomenon at work, reductionist and yet showing multiplicity and potentiality at the same time. The Sea Serpent is not being

made intelligible, instead, it is the human imagination as applied to it that has become intelligible, and each representation as elaborated has the potential to become more intelligible on its own.³⁸⁸

The Claude glass or mirror was an observation device still in use in 1817, a hand-held, shaded convex mirror held in front of the shoulder, and used to transform an image of the landscape behind one's back of off to one's side into "something like a miniature painting . . ." Its users, among whom was the British Romanticist poet Thomas Gray, advocated the picturesque in art. The picturesque theory held that there was a medium between the beautiful and sublime in the Burkean sense, and second, that natural representation was meant to show an improved nature, and by way of the Claude mirror, it could. Art theorist William Gilpin wrote in 1794 that though it is pleasant to "look at objects through stained glass," he emphasized that none of the alternative "modes of vision is superior, or even equal to the eye in its natural state; it is the novelty alone of the exhibition, that pleases . . ." Sea Serpent drama, fiction and art started with an experience that had not been removed from nature because, at least for the first forty-five years of the nineteenth-century, the natural historical inquiry into the Sea Serpent remained an open, if often-neglected question. The Sea Serpent's imaginative existence was founded on the elements of the Sea Serpent sighting reports and expedition narratives from New England, and the artists, writers, directors, actors and

³⁸⁸ Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, (Phila. Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2011),
 JONATHAN, "The Sea Monster," *The National Register, a Weekly Paper Containing . . .*, 4 11, (Sept. 13, 1817), 171 *American Periodicals Series Online*, 3-2014

audiences created their own imagined sighting narratives. The held up their experience, expertise, and perception in their respective fields like the Claude mirror, and so they “idealized . . . the natural” and made the Sea Serpent real.³⁸⁹

Furthermore, the chapter explains how, by way of the imaginative Sea Serpent, a collectively-created and many-faceted object, the sighting experience was effectively bottled, commodified and the public interest in it gratified. The nineteenth-century was a time in which people looked for authenticity in many types of cultural expression and, frequently, they were simultaneously disappointed and delighted. The cultural expressions of the Sea Serpent were authentic in that they represented the knowledge, interests and ideas of the people creating them, yet they could also be called inauthentic because the object they depicted was a visual phenomenon that remained scientifically interesting and plausible, yet unverified. In its plausibility, the Sea Serpent, like the kraken, “violated the territorial limits set by zoology” and so there was a “widespread inclination” among zoologists to respond contentiously to “these incursions into their domain.” Because there was no “authoritative and univocal source of information about the natural world” at the time, and because the ocean, particularly, “remained an unplumbed mystery,” there was opened, a cultural space inhabited by a “disorderly

³⁸⁹ Emily Brady, “Environmental Aesthetics,” *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*, Vol 1, J. Baird Callicott and Robert Frodeman, eds., (Detroit: MacMillan Reference, 2009), 316; William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery and Other Woodland Views* . . . , Vol. II, Second Edition, (London: Blamire, 1794), 226
<http://books.google.com/books?id=13RGAAAAYAAJ&vq=mirror&pg=PA226#v=onepage&q&f=false>
 Google Books, 3-2014;
 Markus Poetzsch, “Vying for ‘Brilliant Landscapes’: Claude Mirrors, Wordsworth, and Poetic Vision,” *Wordsworth Circle*, 39 3, (Summer, 2008), 114, *Academic One File*, 3-2014

polyphony” concerning the plausible Sea Serpent for a few decades after 1817. The same cultural space made possible the imagined Sea Serpent, an aspect of a “particular mode of popular culture” prevalent throughout nineteenth-century America that one historian has called “artful deception.” The Sea Serpent created an imaginative, enthusiastic, and commercial response before any influence of literary and artistic Romanticism was manifest in American culture. It showed certain narrative and presentative dynamics that would become part of the showmanship of curiosities eighteen years before the first exhibition launched by Phineas T. Barnum.³⁹⁰

Barnum, whose first exhibition of a curiosity was that of Joice Heth in August, 1835, and whose second most significant venture was the exhibition of the Feejee Mermaid in 1842, used carefully-timed, multiple backstories concerning his curiosities to great effect in the first year of his career in showmanship. In the case of Heth, Barnum first identified her as the 160-year-old caretaker of the infant George Washington, who sang hymns in the eighteenth-century style. While at the beginning, Barnum chose the “tried and true” formula of the “quintessentially antebellum American mixture of pseudo-scientific analysis, racist gawking, energetic patriotism, and pious musical entertainment” he eventually had to travel the narrative track, and created a detailed script for her. In its emphasis, this script relied on a “trio of promotional seductions,” her strange appearance, presumed

³⁹⁰ Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid, and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1998), 182-183

historical connection to Washington, and her singing. Joice Heth created interest, not because of her presentation, but because of the presenter's ability to make her into a representation, a kind of living memory. At the bottom of it all, though, was the question of her authenticity, and over the proceeding months, Barnum would play with that question in light of several plausible assumptions applied to Heth.³⁹¹

Heth's exhibit held its own against another highly profitable, contemporaneous one, Johann Maelzel's chess playing automaton, whose "status as an authentic thinking machine remained a matter of intense public doubt, speculation, and debate." Subsequent events concerning Heth's exhibit indicate that Barnum had followed the public mood closely in relation to his competitor's curiosity, for, when Heth's audiences declined in number, Barnum "surreptitiously" planted news stories in Boston stating that Heth was, in fact, an automaton constructed of "whalebone, india-rubber, and numberless springs ingeniously put together . . . the exhibitor is a ventriloquist and all the conversations apparently held with the ancient lady are purely imaginary.'" Boston press notices immediately afterward "undermined the credibility of Heth's public persona," and "created a new tale of managerial deceit to go along with Heth's . . . tales about raising little George." As an ancient lady, Heth was authentic, but as Washington's caretaker or

³⁹¹ James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 2001), 7

an automaton, her identity was situated in a dynamic of plausibility Barnum played upon quite self-consciously.³⁹²

By the use of deceptive narratives in the light of plausibility, Barnum could and did in 1835, make one object so interesting that viewers would pay for several tickets over the course of several months just to try to understand the truth or deception of what they saw. The kind of “artful deception” observable in the Heth exhibit of 1835 did not represent “a specific nineteenth-century period style,” nor did it represent “a hard and fast choice between complete detection and total bewilderment, honest promotion and shifty misrepresentation, innocent amusement and social transgression,” nor was it a “historically distinct, cohesive movement.” The “artful deception,” practiced in the Joice Heth exhibit, like the Sea Serpent exhibits predating it, possesses aesthetic roots in “carnavalesque entertainment and still life painting” and represents “a cultural current far too eclectic and long running to fit neatly within one of the nineteenth-century’s many categorical boxes.” If Barnum “serves as a kind of prologue to the much broader history of the nineteenth-century American popular culture,” then the Sea Serpent phenomenon is certainly the prologue to the prologue. The interest in the Sea Serpent is explicable only in light of its plausibility, the creature was and was not simultaneously.³⁹³

³⁹² James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 2001), 7

³⁹³ James W. Cook, *Arts of Deception*, 16, 12

Barnum's showmanship and success were a development related to yet another many-faceted historical phenomenon, the market revolution, which is dated by Charles Sellers as beginning in 1815 and continuing through the 1850s. In his discussion of the Feejee Mermaid, James Cook tells us that the exhibit, debuting in 1842, was "the first piece of business to make Barnum and the American Museum nationally famous," and the "enterprise became synonymous with the showman's tricksterism . . ." The question of authenticity came to be understood in light of the delivery of a product in the case of this curiosity, a kind of doll made in the shape of a mermaid using components from various animals. Authenticity was a commercially vexing subject because the audience members were quite conscious that they had paid "at the door to see something promised in advance by the showman." A showman who was known for serving "big fat lies," lies that raised "fundamental questions about the workings of the emerging market economy and the more fluid system of social relations it was producing."³⁹⁴

The trade in curiosities and their exhibition was, in the eighteenth-century to 1835, conducted on more "conventional" principles. Curiosities were personal, non-commercial objects that had "backgrounds of some certainty." Generally, they were "amazing machines built by a virtuoso," an unusual person, or "an exotic object brought back from a colonial expedition." The Feejee Mermaid had been the property of a mariner before she came into the hands of Barnum and Boston impresario Moses Kimball. As the eighteenth-century progressed, "curiosity

³⁹⁴ James W. Cook, *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, 78-80

distribution became . . . anonymous, complex, and commercial” with the development of “curiosity shops” just post 1700. Curiosities, then, slowly became commodified over the course of the eighteenth-century, and by 1817, they possessed “fluctuating value,” and were “bought and sold through middlemen” on the open market.³⁹⁵

The management of museums in the eighteenth-century reflected Enlightenment ideas of the development of human understanding, if we use Charles Willson Peale as an example. He made carefully considered choices about how he should “guarantee the authenticity” of all his curious objects. Peter Cook argues that Peale could have “been much less clear, for instance about the origins and presentation of his curious objects” because “at much the same moment, uncertainty about the commercial authenticity of curiosities was becoming the norm . . .” Peale moved in the opposite direction, toward the objectives of contemporary natural history, taxonomic clarity and leaving “nothing to chance: not the typicality of the stuffed animal or its habitat; not how it was understood or classified by naturalists, not even where he, as museum director, had obtained the skin to be stuffed.” His decisions amounted to a specific visual dynamic, the “Enlightenment’s ‘camera obscura’ model of visibility: a clear and unambiguous perceptual relationship between viewer and object, in which ‘observation leads to truthful inferences about the world.’” Exhibits of the Sea Serpent, in spite of the means they employed, the panorama, the painted transparency, partake of the

³⁹⁵ James W. Cook, *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, 86-87

‘camera obscura’ dynamic, while the fictional narratives represent the Sea Serpent phenomenon in the Claude mirror, the creature and nature appear in an improved and yet simplified image, and the experiences of sighting and expedition are easily seen together. Elements of the historical phenomenon were depicted alongside fiction, and so to write in such a mode was to compress the phenomenon, to make it something one could hold in the mind and remember.³⁹⁶

Finally, like the third chapter, the following shows the Sea Serpent as culturally active, but unlike the third chapter, it will discuss the cultural dimensions of the Sea Serpent in literature, drama, and art. In dealing with the content of the sources, it will emphasize how they magnified aspects of the phenomenon in the cultural and commercial ventures it generated. The central aspect and essential dynamic of the Sea Serpent phenomenon was the sighting. The sighting was, all the deponents insisted, a true event; the sighting was the thing Captain Richard Rich stated was a deception.

The sources indicate that in the literary response to the Sea Serpent, we are not dealing with believers, but with people who are willing to begin their writing with David Humphreys’ cooling question, “what if?” If the Sea Serpent cannot be known, then it becomes potential, amorphous. When confronted with an amorphous reality, the writers of New England, as Barnum would do long afterward, decided to confer several shapes onto the phenomenon, and these play out, in magnified and various terms, aspects of the actual phenomenon. Thus Sea

³⁹⁶ James W. Cook, *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, 90-92

Serpent literature, art and drama partook of illusionism, “a recurring style in Western culture” in which “one inhabits a “dialectical realm” between “fact and fiction.” In acting out the phenomenon on the page, New England and other eastern writers created a discourse of the Sea Serpent that stood separate from its place in the collective memory of New Englanders, and yet reinforced the collective memory of the phenomenon into the mid-nineteenth-century and beyond.³⁹⁷

The Sea Serpent phenomenon was part of a larger cultural movement confined to the West in which attitudes toward the sea and shore changed from repulsion to fascination. The ancient Greeks, no strangers to maritime pursuits, created a commercial network of settlements from Iberia to the Black Sea between 720 and 500 B.C., and recognized the sea as “complementing and contrasting with other features of the Greek landscape, and the realm of divine powers . . .” Through their settlements, Greek peoples surrounded the Mediterranean, and “literary and other archaeological sources” attest that the sea, as an “integral part of ancient Greek life” acted as a “mediating and unifying agent” in their otherwise conflict-ridden history.³⁹⁸

But, in spite of the ancient Greeks’ recognition of the sea’s importance in their mythology and epic, and its positive effect in their history, other cultural evidence indicates that the Archaic Greeks conceived of the sea as harboring ambivalence, having more than one character, and so it was that in the ninth-

³⁹⁷ James W. Cook, *Arts of Deception*, 17

³⁹⁸ Astrid Lindenlauf, “The Sea as a Place of No Return in Ancient Greece,” *World Archaeology*, 35 3, Seascapes, (Dec. 2003), 416-17

century B.C. that the sea became the abode mostly of creatures “half human and half beast.” The sea was a place of indignity, where courts of law were held on shore for people whose criminal turpitude was such that it was “improper for them to set foot on land.” Several incidents in Homeric literature depict the casting of enemies, disfigured and unwanted children into the sea. Murder victims were thrown into the marine depths “to cover up the marks of a crime.” These uses of the sea, whether in collective memory, oral tradition, history or literature, made a durable reputation for the sea as the bringer of death and decay, a place made in ancient Greek culture “to take things away, and to make things disappear.” People living in the Classical Era of the West, cultural historian Alain Corbin concurs, “knew nothing of the attraction of seaside beaches, the emotion of a bather plunging into the waves, or the pleasures of a stay at the seaside.”³⁹⁹

Similarly, elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean world, narratives of the Creation and Flood in Mesopotamian, Greek and Biblical traditions, were also instrumental in constructing repulsion toward sea and shore. Tradition tells us that at the Creation, the earth, like water, “was without form and void” and remained so until after “the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” Corbin tells us that Genesis “imposed” upon the West “the vision of the ‘great abyss,’ a place of unfathomable mysteries . . . and the unimaginable over which the Spirit of God moved at the dawn of Creation.” In the story of the Flood, the ocean, whether

³⁹⁹ Lindenlauf, “The Sea as a Place of No Return,” 420-1; Alain Corbin, “Chapter 1, The Roots of Fear and Repulsion,” *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750-1840*, Trans. Jocelyn Phelps, (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 1

terrestrial or celestial, was God's means of punishing sinful humanity, and as people stood on the shore in their present day in the ancient, medieval or modern era, they saw that the ocean and shore's "actual configuration was the remnant of the disaster." The waters of the Flood took long to recede, as the "flooding ocean continued to sweep into subterranean caverns." The sea became potential chaos, restrained only by God, and the landscape surrounding it, in its "irregularity and the incomprehensible pattern of the reefs which border it" showed the effects of that chaos. The Biblical and the Graeco-Roman traditions of the West influenced perceptions of the ocean and shore more profoundly than any literary source until the Enlightenment.⁴⁰⁰

In the eighteenth-century, attitudes toward the marine environment and the sea began a slow shift from repulsion to fascination. Corbin situates the change in perspective in the context of the development of natural history and natural theology in Enlightenment Europe, where "the beauty of nature bore witness to the power and bounty of the Creator. God regulated the spectacle" through the laws created from his "infinite wisdom" and "providential intentions." The earth, or natural world, according to this natural theology, was contextualized in terms of reading, it "appeared to be a book written by the Creator and intended for man." This edifying vision of humanity, nature and the Creator, gave rise to natural history and the classifying work of Carolus Linnaeus. It was also the impetus toward

⁴⁰⁰ Alain Corbin, *Lure of the Sea*, 1-4;
 Book of Genesis, 1:2-4, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/k/kjv/kjv-idx?type=DIV2&byte=1493> Bible,
 King James Version, accessed 2-2014;
 Alain Corbin, *Lure of the Sea*, 1-5

“touristic travel,” and “henceforth, members of society’s elite would seek in it the opportunity to experience this new relationship with nature.”⁴⁰¹

The first culturally significant evidence of a change in attitudes toward the marine environment emerged in the eighteenth-century as depiction of the spectacle of sea and shore expressed in poetry and literature. In September, 1712, Richard Addison responded to a series of essays titled *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, by noting that one of the sources of such pleasures is greatness, and nothing he knew of affected his imagination by its greatness more, than “the sea, or ocean . . . this prodigious bulk of waters, even in a calm . . .” produced in him “a very pleasing astonishment.” Invoking natural theology, he writes that that he could not “survey this world of fluid matter without thinking on the hand that first poured it out . . .” Even though Addison’s description of his emotions pre-dates the work of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant by several decades, in its fascination, and a willingness to lift one’s notions of the marine environment from repulsion toward the contemplation of greatness, it anticipates the latter formulations of the sublime. Writers and philosophers of the eighteenth-century showed rhetorical facility in their descriptions of the content and meaning of the marine experience, but for most of that century, Helen Rozwadowski argues, Biblical and classical narratives “shaped the image of the sea more than accounts of travel or exploration.” Alain Corbin argues, though, that between 1712 and 1726, the date

⁴⁰¹ Alain Corbin, *Lure of the Sea*, 20-24

of publication for James Thomson's poem "Winter," "a delight in the seashore insinuated itself into English literature."⁴⁰²

More convincing evidence of a change in attitude in the West toward the seashore is the development of sea bathing in the eighteenth-century. Before then, taking the waters at various inland mineral springs had been a popular recreational and hygienic practice, and bathing resorts were a refuge for the upper classes where they retreated "in the face of disease or threats" to their political and social power. By the eighteenth-century, just breathing sea air was thought to be healthful, and sea-bathers tried, by way of regulated hydrotherapy, to cure what would be called affective disorders today, "melancholy, bad temper and anxiety." The systems of treatment were based on "the paradox that the sea was a refuge and source of hope because it inspired fear . . ." and so sea-bathers "endured the terror it engendered" to "overcome their infirmities." Sea bathing also served "to assuage the new anxieties that were looming up one after another in the eighteenth-century, among the ruling classes."⁴⁰³ Helen Rozwadowski argues that it was not until the mid-nineteenth-century that the English and Americans, in large numbers, discovered the seashore, for such a process required the "confluence of

⁴⁰²" Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, "No 480, Saturday, September 20, 1712," *The Spectator, With a Biographical and Critical Preface, and Explanatory . . .*, Vol. IV, 4 Volumes, (London: Bosworth, 1855), 45

<http://books.google.com/books?id=QgQ7eoUyvv4C&lpg=PA45&ots=e5ONvWXn4J&dq=heavings%20of%20this%20prodigious%20Bulk%20of%20Waters%2C&pg=PA45#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, 2-2014;

Helen Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean: The Discovery and Exploration of the Deep Sea*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008), 6;

Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea*, 124

⁴⁰³ Helen Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean*, 8

Alain Corbin, *Lure of the Sea*, 54

railroads, therapeutic bathing, the educational benefits of natural history collecting, and desirable society.” Alonzo Lewis, the “Bard of Lynn,” Massachusetts, commented in *History of Lynn including Nahant . . .*, 1844, asserted in a discussion of his own present day, that “perhaps nothing is more conducive to health than sea-bathing.”⁴⁰⁴

The culture of the New England seashore in the early nineteenth-century, then, would seem to be somewhere between the attitudes of repulsion and fascination, between the workplace and the resort. And then, in 1817, the Sea Serpent swam with rippling strokes into this environment and revealed that in Massachusetts in particular, large numbers of people could gather on the seashore and show an interest in something nondescript, out there in the blue. “*Many hundreds of the citizens of Cape-Ann, have seen this novelty,*” the *Columbian Centinel* of Boston reported in late August, 1817. In the year following, “Samuel Simpleton” observed on August 5 he received, almost daily, “some account of this extraordinary visiter of our shores.” In 1819, another crowd numbering “between two and three-hundred” saw the Sea Serpent in the “forenoon” of August 21 and they, according to the *Essex Patriot*, came from Boston, Nahant, Lynn “and other places . . .”⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁴ Helen Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean*, 9;
Alonzo Lewis, *History of Lynn, Including Nahant . . .*, Second Edition, (Boston: Dickinson, 1844), 264
<http://books.google.com/books?id=aUehQrAgP-8C&dq=alonzo%20lewis%20history%20of%20lynn%20nahant&pg=PR4#v=onepage&q=sea-bathing&f=false> Google Books, accessed 2-2014

⁴⁰⁵ “The Sea Serpent,” *Columbian Centinel* [Boston, MA], 27 Aug. 1817;

The Sea Serpent sightings were a feature of an environment recently, if gradually, changed from a sink of repulsion, to a spectacle of wide open skies, shiny water, waves that were soothing in their sound and awe-inspiring in their milling of the bright sand. The seashore, in at least two decades, would promise health and vigor. Seaside walks encouraged the cultivation of the affective response to nature encouraged in the writing of natural theology, along with the nationalistic response in the practice of natural history through collecting minerals, animal or plant matter. After 1817, the seashore in Massachusetts also promised, if one was fortunate, a view of the Sea Serpent.

However, not all travelers to New England's seashore were interested in the beach after 1817, some acted out the Burkean dynamic of the curious response to the novel by pursuing, often in their imaginations, the Sea Serpent. In August, 1817, contemporary with the seashore crowds at Cape Ann, fourteen "of the citizens of *Marblehead* entered Cape-Ann harbor, in a sloop and boat." They plied the water "in all directions" with the objective of capturing the Serpent, having on board "all the necessary apparatus for killing and securing him." They withdrew slightly when the weather became "boisterous and unfavorable," and then they returned to Marblehead the next day. This was one of the first of many expeditions to take the Sea Serpent, and as they kept failing, people wrote to newspapers with their own suggestions on affecting the Sea Serpent's capture. One Boston writer

"Samuel Simpleton," "SALEM, AUGUST 5," *The Idiot, or, Invisible Rambler*, [Boston, MA], 5 Aug. 1818;

"Copy of a Letter from JAMES PRINCE, Esq. . . .," *Boston Gazette*, 26 Aug. 1819;

"The Sea Serpent," *Essex Patriot* [Haverhill, MA], 21 Aug., 1819

thought that the Sea Serpent might be made vulnerable by way of a toy. He asked if the “Naval Commander on this station . . . would send out one of the gun boats, in search of the strange animal.” If the gunboat could just “float about the waters where the animal has been accustomed to resort,” it might become “so familiar as to induce his approach,” and so create a situation facilitating its capture. An advertisement for Hall’s Patent Rifle carried in the *Salem Gazette* and the *New-York Columbian* in September, 1817, stated that because of “suggestions that the Sea-Serpent now on our coast is impenetrable by a leaden ball, experiments have been made with one of capt. Hall’s patent rifles . . .” to ascertain its effectiveness against “a carpenter’s adze, of common thickness . . .” The adze was “shot through” at twenty and then at forty yards. Therefore, “the conclusion is irresistible,” that one ball from Hall’s Patent Rifle can “penetrate the serpent,” and because these firearms “shoot with extreme accuracy, a good marksman could strike him at any part . . .” In 1833, the *Norwich Courier* reported that a Dr. Scudder of New York City, had invented and patented a torpedo for destroying the Sea Serpent and was on his way to Nahant.⁴⁰⁶

Others acted out the novelty and curiosity dynamic by way of Sea Serpent cruises along the New England coast. Where Samuel L. Mitchill had characterized the phenomenon as a “propensity towards the strange and the marvelous” in which

⁴⁰⁶ “The Sea Serpent,” *Columbian Centinel* [Boston, MA], 27 Aug. 1817;
 “The Sea Serpent,” *Boston Gazette*, 26 Aug. 1819;
 “Hall’s Patent Rifle,” *New-York Columbian* [New York City], 3 Sept. 1817;
 “Hall’s Patent Rifle,” *Independent Chronicle & Boston Patriot*, 30 Aug. 1817;
 “Items,” *Norwich Courier* [Norwich, CT], 17 Jul. 1833

present day people showed “a credulity very much resembling that of the remote ages,” when the oceans were “peopled with gorgons, mermaids, chimeras, hydras, dragons, and all the monsters of fabulous zoology.” Mitchill, in telling his tale about the Sea Serpent, identified the creature as representing the steamboat, for, just as the Sea Serpent pursued and devoured small fish, so the steamboat would take “much of the business of transporting passengers . . . from the small craft heretofore employed.”⁴⁰⁷ In addition, where Mitchill saw technological and economic change, at least one entrepreneur on the Massachusetts coast saw an opportunity to sell the Sea Serpent sighting experience. On August 20, 1819, just after the publication of James Prince’s letter, a steamboat operator offered a cruise from Boston to Nahant “in consequence of the reappearance of the Sea Serpent in Lynn Bay, the Steam Boat will go there THIS DAY to see what is to be seen.”⁴⁰⁸

The steam boat journey interrupted by a Sea Serpent, the encounter perhaps anticipated by the operator and passengers of the 1819 cruise, was rendered into fiction and set on the steamboat *Connecticut* in “The Sea Serpents and the Steam Boat,” 1833, a story from Portland, Maine, first published on July 6. The *Connecticut*’s commander, a Capt. Porter was, on the night before, hailed by a schooner close to Nahant and told that he might see the Sea Serpent, which was bearing “east of Nahant” and “very soon,” every passenger on the *Connecticut* saw “not one Sea Serpent alone, but three, some say four . . . monsters of the deep . . .”

⁴⁰⁷ Samuel L. Mitchill, “Art. IX, History of Sea-Serpentism, . . .,” *American Journal of Science and the Arts*, 15 2, (Jan. 1829), 351; Ann Arbor: *American Periodicals Series Online*, 2-2014

⁴⁰⁸ “Steamboat and Sea Serpent,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 20 Aug. 1819

Their lengths were guessed variously to be around 90 to 100 feet, one's head was shaped like that of a pickerel. One of the serpents, throwing his body fifty feet above the water "in a spiral, undulatory motion . . . formed . . . upon a calm sea a beautiful dark arch." Before and after the arch, the serpents "could be seen for some time with a glass," and they "seemed to enjoy the sport," of playing around the steamboat. "Perhaps they took it for another 'Serpent' . . . on the deep and were seeking for an introduction." Though a derivative relationship between the first tale of the "History of Sea-Serpentism" and the "Sea Serpents and the Steamboat" cannot be argued, it is fair to say that the latter fiction appears to elaborate, depict and re-direct Mitchill's metaphorical Sea Serpent Steamboat. Over time, the metaphor was re-directed away from a hot medium, a newsworthy narrative of present-day technological change, and its economic impact. Over time and through several subsequent years of literary development, the metaphor was cooled down such that a more sophisticated literary practitioner could, in his or her elaboration, appeal to the ancient credulity Mitchill observed, and so create the picture of a side-by-side ocean journey, in which the human mythos at play, and a state-of-the-art product of the logos at work, partake.

The appeal of the "Sea Serpents and the Steamboat" is also traceable to a print upheaval in the 1830s, as argued by Isabelle Lehuu, and a corresponding interest in "mythic sea monsters" documented by David S. Reynolds that would eventually give rise to the impulse for Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, 1851. Lehuu argues that the literate American of the early nineteenth-century was living in a

world liminal between two understandings of reading, first, there were the collective and intellectual uses of literacy that made the reader a citizen, and second, there was the commercial construction of the reader as a print consumer, which would be fully realized by the magazines of the later nineteenth-century.

“The historical moment defined by the antebellum period,” 1830-1860, was a “space for change and renewal in American culture” because it allowed “publishing innovations to rise and fall,” and so it saw “a multifaceted inversion in the authority of the word.”⁴⁰⁹ The “Sea Serpents and the Steamboat” illustrates this inversion because, first it was carried in a newspaper, the *Norwich Courier*, and not in a literary or humor magazine, and second and most significant, in its form because it is written as a Sea Serpent sighting report, the hot medium and building block of the composite type constructed in 1817. The editor, or writer of the story, tells us that “of all these facts, we are informed by many persons,” and yet his own credulity waits for the report of “one, upon whom we can rely—and who has hitherto been incredulous enough.” In keeping with the discourse of fact described by Andrew Lewis, the editor looked for a Sea Serpent conversion narrative among the witnesses, and added it to his story to give its mythos element a factual cast, and to ground further its report-form. The narrative is obviously fiction, and yet it is written in the form and intensity of fact, a cool medium situated in the form of a hot one, and thus it represents the paradox of the collective and intellectual aspects of reading and recording the Sea Serpent report in the discourse of fact, and the

⁴⁰⁹ Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America*, (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2000), 15

commercial aspects of the written phenomenon as entertainment. Despite its form, the story was clearly written as entertainment, and so it is an aspect of the commercialization of storytelling and thus part of the slow transformation Isabelle Lehuu observed in the reading practices of nineteenth-century American culture. Better systems of print distribution facilitated these changes, along with “the development of common schools,” which led to the creation of “an increasingly literate population.” Economic growth in the period c. 1833 gave rise to a society and culture that were “more leisured and more willing to seek entertainment.” This divide between the citizenship and commercial dimensions of reading is mirrored in the literary culture of New England as observed by Lawrence Buell, who notes that concept of authorship shifted “from the artist conceived as public citizen toward the artist as private visionary or entrepreneur,” thus giving rise to the author who “seeks an individual and sometimes even a countercultural voice but who also longs for the imprimatur of the old consensus” because he plays “moral monitor” while posturing irreverently.⁴¹⁰

The Sea Serpent stayed on many peoples’ minds after he first appeared in the waters off Gloucester, particularly those of artists in New England and New York City. Significant among the sources for the Sea Serpent, are several

⁴¹⁰ “The Sea Serpents and the Steamboat,” *Norwich Courier*, 17 Jul. 1833; Andrew Lewis, *The Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*, (Phila.: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 27; Susan Belasco Smith, Kenneth M. Price, “Introduction: Periodical Literature in Social and Historical Context,” *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Charlottesville, VA: Univ of Virginia Press, 1995), 5; Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance*, (New York: Cambridge U P, 1986), 20

announcements for exhibits of panoramas and other artistic renderings of the creature between 1817 and 1819. The panorama was an early form of pictorial and mass entertainment, developed in 1787 when it was first patented in England. The panorama was the artists' answer to the burgeoning interest in seeing the horizon in Europe. The horizon was first understood as a mathematical concept in the fifteenth-century, and eighteenth-century people probably understood it to mean "a particular kind of line in art or mathematics as a sensory experience." They were also aware by then that the horizon, like a shadow, followed a person everywhere, and to transcend it and thus to refine one's intellect and cultivate the aesthetic sense, one had to vary it. Many people accomplished this either by travel or by viewing the horizon on unfinished towers and upper areas of cathedrals.⁴¹¹

The panorama wrenched a horizon out of an often distant space and time, and as an exhibit, consisted of two elements, the first was an observation platform, "often disguised as a tower or hilltop, or the deck of a ship." From the platform, the audience viewed the second element, the horizon "recreated by a circle of canvas." The panorama crystallized representations of horizons far distant from the viewing area, and these were "kept permanently available for the public to try out, as elementary physics experiments are in many museums today." Panorama artists of the nineteenth-century chose subjects like the Versailles Palace, urban landscapes and battlefields, and painted them with the objective of achieving "the most dramatic levels of verisimilitude possible . . ." To do this, they chose "exterior views

⁴¹¹Oettermann, Stephan, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, (New York: Zone, 1997), 8-11

that would appear completely natural and true to scale from the observation platform, as if the viewer were situated within the outdoor site on canvas.” Unlike most of the mediums of the nineteenth-century, the panorama anticipated the compression of twentieth-century media observed by Marshall McLuhan, in that it compressed the experience of two locations, one virtual, one actual, into the individual experience of the viewer. In its ability to compress space, the panorama was, in essence, not unlike the Nov. 18, 1951 premiere of the CBS television series, “See It Now,” when Edward Murrow and Don Hewitt, by way of the “recently completed transcontinental coaxial cable” showed a national audience side by side video feeds, one of the Brooklyn Bridge, the other of the Golden Gate Bridge.⁴¹²

There were three Sea Serpent panoramas exhibited in several locations in New England and New York City in 1817 and 1818. The most important was titled “The Great Sea Serpent as seen in Gloucester Harbor on 14 August, 1817,” painted in Boston by John R. Penniman (1782-1841), and based on a series of drawings by “Capt. John Beach,” one of the Sea Serpent’s most enthusiastic promoters. John Babson, in *History of the Town of Gloucester, Cape Ann, Including the Town of Rockport*, 1860, tells us that the English-born Beach was “a man whose peculiarities will long keep his name in traditional remembrance.” In a lengthy footnote, Babson related a short story of his life in Gloucester, Sea Serpent omitted. Beach was a

⁴¹² Ottermann, Stephan, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, 11-12;
 Peter W. Cook, *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, 227-229;
 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 3-4, 12, 13;
 Adrienne Faillace, “Saw It Then: Murrow’s ‘See It Now’ Turns 60,” *Archive of American Television*,
<http://www.emmytvlegends.org/news/saw-it-then-murrows-see-it-now-turns-60> Academy of
 Television Arts and Sciences, 1995-2013

successful businessman, he “carried on the manufacture of cordage,” bought an estate, added “two stories to the house in a fanciful style of architecture,” built a rope-walk close to his home, and was noted for his “wild pranks on convivial occasions.” He moved to Chillicothe, Ohio in 1819. Penniman was a “decorative painter, illustrator, and portraitist in greater Boston and central Massachusetts” at the time he painted his Sea Serpent panorama. Like Beach, he was an entrepreneur, one of the “earliest” lithographers in America, worked on furniture and panels as well as on canvas, and designed certificates for membership in the Massachusetts Mechanic Association, which he joined in 1818.⁴¹³

Penniman’s panorama, accompanied by the deformed black snake believed to be the Sea Serpent’s infant, was first exhibited in Boston on Oct. 6, in Salem between Oct. 10 and mid-November, and then again in Boston. In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the *Portsmouth Oracle’s* editor hoped that the exhibit would be “moved to the eastward when taken down” from Boston. On Christmas Day, the same exhibit was shown in New York City at a museum owned by a John A. Friedle, on Broadway because it had “so much attracted the attention of the public . . .” on its tour of the Massachusetts coast. The New York City advertisement promised that “ladies and gentlemen of science and taste, by calling, may satisfy themselves

⁴¹³ John J. Babson, *History of the Town of Gloucester, Cape Ann Including Rockport*, (Gloucester, MA: Procter, 1860), 414, *n+*
<http://books.google.com/books?id=OrkyAQAAIAAJ&dq=Babson%2C%20John&pg=PA414#v=onepage&q&f=false> *Google Books*, accessed 2-2014;
 “John Ritto Penniman,” Artist Biography,
http://www.worcesterart.org/Collection/Early_American/Artists/penniman/biography/index.html
Early American Paintings, Worcester, MA: Worcester Art Museum, accessed 2-2014;
 The painting is reproduced in Ralph W. Dexter, “Cape Ann Visits of the Great Sea Serpents, (1639-1886,” *American Neptune*, 46 4, (1986), 215

in viewing this Non Discript. [sic]" The exhibit, in combining a scientific curiosity with an artistic production, was novel for its time and anticipated the mid-nineteenth-century American dime museums of the North, where the use of space showed "a so-called environmental entertainment, among whose fixed exhibits mobile spectators could organize their own journey." The Sea Serpent exhibit also anticipated the influence of the Victorian ethos of well-used leisure, which, having promoted the "success of the lyceum movement and public education crusade . . . prompted managers to highlight their museums' pedagogical function."⁴¹⁴

The image made the Sea Serpent sighting portable, and over time, was significant also for the authoritativeness of the depiction of Gloucester Harbor. The painting shows Gloucester Harbor, two churches stand to the left, a windmill stands on a promontory in the center, and there are numerous ships off to the right. There are several small boats in the water, and in the extreme foreground is the Sea Serpent. He is not prominent, as he swims, flashing his tongue toward the town, into the harbor, his head raised perhaps a few feet out of the water, his tongue striking the air. Each rippled protuberance is only partially visible—the Serpent appears as a dark thread among the white peaks of the waves. The *Boston Weekly Magazine* observed, "We have the less reason to regret his having defeated all the

⁴¹⁴ *Boston Gazette*, 2 Oct. 1817;
Salem Gazette [Salem, MA], 10 Oct. 1817;
Portsmouth Oracle [Portsmouth, NH], 1 Nov. 1817;
 "The Young Sea Serpent, or the Infant of the Great Sea Monster," *New-York Daily Advertiser*, 25 Dec. 1817;
 Dennett, Andrea Stulman, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America*, (New York, London: New York U P, 1997), 5-7

attempts” of the 1817 expeditions because “the majestic personage has not departed without leaving his *likeness* behind him.” And while a “correct delineation of the mighty monster” was one of Penniman’s objectives, another, and one shared by promoters of the exhibits, was the creation of a minutely accurate picture of the town and its harbor, “based on a scientific representation of Gloucester and the surrounding scenery.”⁴¹⁵

The result of these efforts was remarked upon at the time, authors of pieces in the *Boston Weekly Magazine*, the *Boston Intelligencer*, and the *Salem Gazette* were not sparing in their compliments on the accuracy of the picture, and its accuracy became authority when it dazzled historians even in the early twentieth-century. “The whole, as a Landscape and Sea Peace [sic] combined, presents a highly picturesque and beautiful scene, independent of the wonderful novelty in the front of the painting . . .” The picture was, the *Boston Intelligencer* commented, “not only very attractive [sic] as an object of curiosity, but as an elegant sample of the art of painting,” and the *Salem Gazette* added “amateurs of painting, naturalists, and the curious in general will find a source of *much and real satisfaction* in Messrs. Beach and Penniman’s painting of the SCOLIOPHIS ATLANTICUS . . .” The scene of Gloucester harbor was “faithfully delineated and exquisitely finished,” and so the painting was “an object of great interest to lovers

⁴¹⁵ “The Sea Serpent,” *Boston Weekly Magazine, Devoted to Polite Literature, Useful Science . . .*, 150, (Sept. 20, 1817), 199, Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*, 9-2009

of the picturesque and of American art.” In February, 1818, the painting by itself was sold to Charles Willson Peale’s Museum in Philadelphia.⁴¹⁶

Penniman’s image is a standing paradox, the fantastic Sea Serpent weaving in the waves, and Gloucester harbor, which was painted with particular attention to accuracy. As a representation of Gloucester, this painting was considered so authoritative that in 1930, Walter Muir Whitehill, as he worked with the Peabody Museum to compile *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier*, 1939, chose to use it as an authoritative representation of the harbor, from the likely vantage point of the *H.M.S. Nymphe*, one of Britain’s blockading ships, in 1814. Though the Sea Serpent in the foreground is unremarked, and the painting is unattributed, it is nonetheless the same one that toured Massachusetts and New York City because of the Sea Serpent phenomenon between October 1817 and January, 1818.⁴¹⁷ Simultaneous with the exhibit of Penniman’s painting were exhibits of other representations in New York City and in Connecticut.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁶“The Sea Serpent,” *Boston Weekly Magazine, Devoted to Polite Literature, Useful Science . . .*, 1 50, (Sept. 20, 1817), 199, Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*, 9-2009;

“The Picture by Mr. Penniman . . .,” *Boston Intelligencer*, 4 Oct. 1817;

“Amateurs of painting . . .,” *Salem Gazette*, 18 Nov. 1817;

“Panorama; Gloucester; Sea-Serpent . . .,” *Salem Gazette*, 10 Feb. 1818

⁴¹⁷ Henry Edward Napier, *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier*, edited by Walter Muir Whitehill, (Salem, MA: Peabody Museum, 1939), xxi

⁴¹⁸ We are told that in August or September, 1817, a Dr. Nathaniel Parsons was determined that “this EXTRAORDINARY MONSTER Should not depart from our shores with the secret of his shape and dimensions confined to himself . . .” And so by procuring a “means of minutely viewing him during his visit to Cape Ann,” and “the assistance of an active mind . . . Dr. P. has placed himself at the side of a Painter . . . who has produced a copy of the living original” on a 300-foot canvas, “well worthy the inspection of the Naturalist . . .” The sight of this painting, exhibited at Washington Hall on Broadway, promised to “gratify every beholder.” Shortly afterward, in October, 1817, the another exhibit of a panorama measuring 35 by 20 feet was given a more elaborate advertisement and augmented slightly. A copy of it was made and exhibited at Mix’s Museum in New Haven,

The Sea Serpent phenomenon, as it began in 1817, was confined to three places, Penobscot Bay, Cape Ann and Nahant, and coincided with the beginning of daily steamboat service between Nahant and Boston. In that same year, Thomas Handasyd Perkins, a wealthy merchant from Boston, built a stone cottage on Nahant. Gloucester historian John J. Babson wrote in 1860 that Perkins had seen the Serpent “in our harbor in 1817.” Two years afterward, Perkins and Edward H. Robbins, a former lieutenant-governor of Massachusetts, built the Nahant Hotel “at an expense of sixty thousand dollars.” By 1826, the stage line from the same Nahant Hotel linked twice a day with stages going daily between Boston and Salem. Among the amenities of the Nahant Hotel, its location provided an opportunity for seaside tourists to, if they were fortunate, have their own Sea Serpent experiences. Among the seaside tourists were James Prince, who brought along his own “glass,” and his family on August 14, 1819, and Samuel Cabot, whose published letter of August 19, 1820, originally written to Perkins, reported his early morning Sea Serpent experience as he was “proceeding to Boston in his chaise.”⁴¹⁹

Connecticut on October 6, 1817. The Sea Serpent was called “A Monster of Uncommon Size,” and the objective of the painting is to “give the public a correct idea of a terrible animal which is now known to exist.” Added to the painting is a “PENCIL DISPLAY” in which there is “no fancy, no fiction, and no poetry in the view . . .” The pencil, in its single-line simplicity, depicts only “a monster whose force is irresistible, whose movement is as swift as the wind, and the terror of whose eye can no more be painted than the strength . . . of his movements over the ocean waves.” The same 35 by 20-foot painting was exhibited in October and November along with “representations of the gallant exploits of the AMERICAN NAVY in the late war, all painted by the hand of a master.”

“Sea Serpent,” *New-York Daily Advertiser*, 23 Sept. 1817;

“The Sea Serpent, A Monster of Uncommon Size,” *New-York Daily Advertiser*, 2 Oct. 1817;

“The Sea Serpent, A Monster of Uncommon Size,” *Connecticut Journal* [New Haven, CT], 6 Oct. 1817;

“Sea Serpent, at the Panorama, 21 Chatham Street,” *New-York Daily Advertiser*, 25 Oct. 1817;

⁴¹⁹ Alonzo Lewis. *The History of Lynn, Including Nahant*, (Boston: Dickinson, 1844), 239-240;

<http://books.google.com/books?id=hXYPAAAAAYAAJ&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, accessed 2-2014

The article "Evidence Respecting the Sea Serpent" dated Sept. 16, 1820, was the last in a series run in the *Boston Intelligencer* that promoted Nahant by way of the Sea Serpent. On July 29, 1820, they reported briefly that the Sea Serpent was seen at Nahant, on August 19, they ran an extended historical report titled "Original Miscellany. The Great Sea Serpent," followed by a facetious piece by an unnamed "wag" titled the "Bye-Laws of the City of Nahant," in their department, the "Mirror of Life." The article depicts what T.H. Perkins and Edward Robbins were investing in when they built the Nahant Hotel, and what they were selling after it was open for business. People residing or vacationing on Nahant are called "Nahantans" the article says, and they "have been governed by no rules regulating the polite, in large cities." Nahant is the place where people go to "'rough it' as the appropriate phrase is . . . rough sports, rough living, rough manners, rough faces, and rough clothes are the order of the day." The statements, although they seem anachronistic to those aware of the ethic of strenuous living espoused and advocated by Theodore Roosevelt in the late nineteenth-century, are obviously facetious because the people who spend time and money at the Nahant Hotel, with its owners' huge investment and bowling alley, is a place for wealthy tourists, people taught early on that they should act politely, in spite of the leveling influence of money in American society at the time. The fourteenth of these rules

"Copy of a Letter from JAMES PRINCE, . . ." *Boston Gazette*, 26 Aug. 1819;
 John J. Babson, *History of the Town of Gloucester, Cape Ann, including the Town of Rockport*, Gloucester: Proctor, 1860,
<http://books.google.com/books?id=OrkyAQAAMAAJ&dq=Babson%2C%20John&pg=PR1#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, accessed 2-2014
 "Miscellany. Evidence Respecting the Sea Serpent," *Boston Intelligencer*, 16 Sept. 1820

states that should any “Lady or Gentleman” acquire a “distinct view of the Sea Serpent,” the person should report his experience to the “Chairman of the Selectmen,” whose duty is to “embody the evidence into the ‘most imposing form,’ and forward it . . . to the incredulous Messrs. Lang and Turner, . . . of the *New-York Gazette*.” So not only is Nahant a place where vacationers strengthen themselves by “roughing it,” but they also have the integrity and respectability of their own perceptions to protect by way of Sea Serpent reports to the New York City skeptics. The Sea Serpent, as a medium, contains the “roughing it” idea, just as does Nahant and “Nahantans” or “Nahanters.”⁴²⁰

In Sept. 1817, there was also increased interest on the part of travelers, in seeing Gloucester and Cape Ann. The *Essex Register* of Salem justified writing their travelogue briefly by way of the Sea Serpent, “the visit of the wonderful fish to Cape Ann, and the uncommon success of the Mackerel Fishery” there, “have induced many persons to visit that part of the State, who hardly had any knowledge of its existence.” The traveling reporter for the *Register* was the Salem polymath of our second chapter, William Bentley, even though the article is unsigned. The success of the mackerel fishery was likely to have been attributable to an 1817 invention, the mackerel jig, a pewter mackerel hook that had been shined by way of shark skin

⁴²⁰ “Mirror of Life,” *Boston Intelligencer*, 9 Sept. 1820

or sandpaper. Fishermen in Cape Ann that year found out quickly that “mackerel hit shiny jigs faster than they ever had baited hooks.”⁴²¹

The “advanced state of this flourishing and advancing people,” impressed Bentley, and he unfolded the narrative of the sometimes-frustrated construction of a pier, visited a “redoubt, which the British dismantled in the war . . .” and saw a “romantic spot” sheltered by a large rock on the shore, which he could imagine would be used to harbor a small skiff, and “as a shelter for the angler when feasting on his prey . . .” He focuses on what people in Cape Ann are doing, he saw Thatcher’s Island “Light houses,” and a “forest of boats fishing in the offing.” But he also brings up the sight of “the remains of a cavern, belonging to the first fishermen, and . . . a house” belonging to ancestors of the Northwoods,” for whom a nearby cove had been named. Improvement was perceptible in the meeting-houses, but as the author en route passed “around Squam shore,” the roads “most agreeably disappointed us . . . if the passes . . . could be rendered more safe, it [Old Town]⁴²² would be one of the most delightful towns in Massachusetts.”⁴²³

⁴²¹ The text is produced roughly in Bentley’s diary. Bentley traveled to Gloucester from Salem, September 8-10, 1817;
 “SALEM, SEPT. 13, 1817.,” *Essex Register*, 13 Sept. 1817;
 William Bentley, *Diary of William Bentley, 1811-1819*, (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1914), 476-479,
<http://books.google.com/books?id=2jM7AQAAMAAJ&lpg=PA478&ots=QibPj6MaIV&dq=Mrs.%20Goach%2C%20poetess%2C%20cape%20ann&pg=PA476#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books,
 accessed 2-2014;

W. Jeffrey Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the North Atlantic in the Age of Sail*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2012), 88

⁴²² The author is describing the northernmost point of Cape Ann.

⁴²³ “SALEM, SEPT. 13, 1817.,” *Essex Register*, 13 Sept. 1817;

Bentley, though he admires the pier construction, the meeting-house, the state of the causeways and the success of the fisheries at Jebaco and Squam, focuses more on hospitality and sightseeing, indicating that the article is designed for people considering a trip up to Gloucester. There is much effort on the writer's part to show that Gloucester is not a wilderness, but a place with improved land and facilities, where refined people live. He described being entertained by a Mr. Francis Poole, and seeing a seventeenth-century settler's log-house, "which had been covered in the modern manner and rendered a decent tenement." He enjoyed also the hospitality of "Gen. Appleton, Dr. Manning, and Capt. Josiah Haskell," who, we are told gave the author all the information he desired. He visited a Mrs. Gooch, the "Poetess of the Island," indicating that he was at the settlement that would be named Rockport in the mid-nineteenth-century. When he visited a "well-cultivated farm" belonging to a Colonel Pierce at Squam, he reported, "we were received with the hospitality of a Patriarch, and in the family of Capt. Trask, we enjoyed the refined pleasures which an enlightened education [can] ever afford." Bentley's private voice, heard in the rough draft of his diary, differs slightly, "at two we reached Col. Pierce and dined with him on Isle of Shoal fish," is all he writes of his encounter with Pierce. Neither in Bentley's diary for those days, nor in the article, is there any mention of David Humphreys, who was in the area gathering evidence at the time for his letters to Sir Joseph Banks. One year afterward, however, Bentley noted that the death of David Humphreys interested him because of their acquaintance in September, 1817. His terse writing recalled

Humphreys' "frequent visits to us at the time of the Cape Ann Serpent" at which he was careful to be "on the spot & to collect all the evidence respecting this new Comer."⁴²⁴

Another fair assumption that the evidence does not bear out is that Bentley was sent as a reporter to Gloucester in the hope that he would see the Serpent and be able to classify it from his deep and encyclopedic knowledge. Bentley's own Sea Serpent sighting was on September 30, 1817, when he wrote in his diary "We have seen the Serpent," and if not for the creature's protuberances, it would have never been thought to have come from "a sea origin," Bentley concluded. He anticipated that the *Essex Register* of Oct. 1 would carry "the whole evidence" from a "Letter & observations."⁴²⁵

Two of the locations at which Sea Serpent sightings were common, Nahant and Cape Ann create, by their topography, the environs of the panorama. Nahant is a peninsula having a rounded, castle-like promontory on the sea at the end of a narrow bridge to the mainland lying between Swampscott to the south and Marblehead to its north. Cape Ann is a peninsula and island formation, surrounded by fingers of water, and accessed through the causeways Bentley described in the *Essex Register's* travelogue. The Sea Serpent was rarely associated with Cape Cod,

⁴²⁴ "SALEM, SEPTEMBER 13, 1817.," *Essex Register*, 13 Sept. 1817; William Bentley, "Sept. 8, 9, 10, 1817," "Feb. 23, 1818," *The Diary of William Bentley*, 476-479 <http://books.google.com/books?id=2jM7AQAAMAAJ&lpg=PA478&ots=QibPj6MaIV&dq=Mrs.%20Goach%2C%20poetess%2C%20cape%20ann&pg=PA476#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, accessed 2-2014

⁴²⁵ William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley*, 481; <http://books.google.com/books?id=2jM7AQAAMAAJ&lpg=PA478&ots=QibPj6MaIV&dq=Mrs.%20Goach%2C%20poetess%2C%20cape%20ann&pg=PA481#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, 2-2014

but was not reported there until after 1825. Buzzard's Bay and Narragansett Bay never saw the Serpent. As he migrated southward in October, 1817, he was reported first close to Rye Neck, in Long Island Sound on November 5, then in New Haven, Connecticut on Nov. 19, and finally off Long Island near Montauk on December 2.⁴²⁶

Like the panorama, these places gave people a view of the oceanic horizon. Such tourists would have experienced the ocean, one of Edmund Burke's "things of great dimensions," which, he argued, if they are annexed to "an adventitious idea of terror . . . become without comparison greater" and sources of the sublime aesthetic experience. Standing on the peninsula of Nahant, one is almost completely surrounded by the ocean, and on Cape Ann, one perceives the ocean's vastness as it surrounds and penetrates the land in several places, in formations like hands and fingers; in almost every place where one views the horizon, the ocean obtrudes. The ocean is, in itself, Burke argued, "an object of no small terror." The Sea Serpent phenomenon was contemporaneous with the cultural shift in perceptions from terror of the sublime ocean to curiosity and the cultivation of natural history and the desire to see the Sea Serpent and the spectacle of the horizon, a desire gratified by the panorama of John Penniman. A similar cultural

⁴²⁶"Sea Serpent," *Connecticut Gazette* [New London, CT], 5 Nov. 1817;
 "Latest of the Sea Serpent," *Connecticut Gazette* [New London, CT], 19 Nov. 1817
 "The Sea Serpent . . .," *Connecticut Journal* [New Haven, CT], 2 Dec. 1817;

impulse concerning vastness, sublimity and the horizon affected the interest in the works of Fitz Henry Lane and Elihu Vedder.⁴²⁷

Other ways of bottling and commercializing the Sea Serpent sighting experience are the various types of exhibits, dramatic productions and products advertised in New York City in November and December, 1817. A December 25, 1817 advertisement titled "The Sea Serpent Again," promised that those "intending to make presents at the approaching holydays, will have an opportunity of doing so," and alongside "Pewter Tea Sets, dressed and undressed Dolls, [and] Magic Lanterns," was the "Sea Serpent in miniature, which will move in any direction by the least touch, having joints throughout its body." In November, 1817, the same newspaper ran two announcements within one week for David Humphreys' book of correspondence to Joseph Banks, *Letters from the Hon. David Humphreys, F.R.S., to the Rt. Hon. Sir Joseph Banks . . . Containing Some Account of the SERPENT OF THE OCEAN*.⁴²⁸

But, the most important means of bottling and selling the Sea Serpent phenomenon in its immediacy was through the sensationalistic literary response it generated in the press. In the "Sea Serpents and the Steamboat," 1833 we saw a spectacle on the sea written in the form of a sighting report. Newspapers are hot in

⁴²⁷ Edmund Burke, "Part II, Sect. II, Terror," *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm> Project Gutenberg, accessed 3-2014;

Oettermann, Stephan, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, (New York: Zone, 1997), 7-15

⁴²⁸ John Langdon, "The Sea Serpent Again," *New-York Daily Advertiser*, 24-26 Dec. 1817; "SEA SERPENT," *New-York Daily Advertiser*, 13 Nov. 1817, 17 Nov. 1817

their format, they appeal to one sense, that of sight, and the reader's primary expectation is information. But in the articles' content, as applied to the Sea Serpent, they are cold in that appeal to the imagination and to any subset of senses by way of language. So in their totality, newspapers containing Sea Serpent fiction and poetry bundled a cold medium into a hot one, because the Sea Serpent in the articles was an elaborated and further elaborable medium, whereas the format, print, crystallized by its heat the literary pieces.⁴²⁹

Newspapers, however, are also products to be sold, and to facilitate the activity of an entrepreneurial spirit in the Sea Serpent phenomenon and thus generate its appeal, New Englanders had to believe and disbelieve in the Sea Serpent simultaneously. Jeffrey Bolster argues that despite Captain Rich's horse mackerel, the skepticism of Samuel L. Mitchill and several natural history scholars, as well as "... most enlightened New Englanders 'preferred to believe in their giant sea serpent.'" And yet, had they apprehended the creature as a hard truth, he would remain a hot medium and unopen to elaboration. As a result, every creative concept of its character dimensions and the meaning of every sighting account would have been circumscribed by science, and so the phenomenon would have no literary or historical dimensions. In order to cool the Sea Serpent down as a medium, New England writers had to hold both belief and unbelief together, not unlike the audience of a play, as they made themselves sculptors in words, of the creature. With the paradox firmly in hand, the writers could turn the Sea Serpent

⁴²⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 13

into a picture of human desires and aspirations concerning life, knowledge of natural history, advancing technology, and prosperity.⁴³⁰

In terms of perspective on the Sea Serpent, the literature anticipated the exhibits of P.T. Barnum in its use of James Cook's "artful deception" because it magnified certain aspects of the historical Sea Serpent encounters, at the same the literature made the Sea Serpent and human beings interact more closely than they ever had. The writing and reading processes involved "a calculated intermixing of the genuine and the fake, enchantment and disenchantment, energetic public exposé and momentary suspension of disbelief."

There was, more generally in American literature between the 1790s and 1830s, a similar intermixing of media objectives between the early American literary magazine and the museum. When Charles Brockden Brown founded the *The Literary Magazine and American Register*, 1803-1806, he defined the work of an editor in its first issue as resembling that of a museum curator, collecting and reflecting "the productions of his nation, to give space and voice to the important ideas and productions of his time, [and] to create a 'repository' for the wisdom and genius of his country." Early American magazines, at the time of the Sea Serpent, published very little original material, seeking to "provide anthologies of a range of excerpted pamphlets, books, reviews and letters." A significant number of them

⁴³⁰ Jeffrey Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2012), 99

included “museum” in their titles, and so they figured themselves, in name and function, “explicitly” as museums.⁴³¹

The New Englanders’ process of fictionalizing the Sea Serpent, viewing it through their own Claude mirror, and improving upon nature, involved magnifying aspects of the historical event in a realistic manner, allowing it to be wonderful and sublime, without turning the corner toward the grotesque.⁴³² Two rare futuristic articles, one written in 1817 and the other in 1823, show this aesthetic balance. In a story dated “Aug. 1, 2217,” the *New England Galaxy and Masonic Magazine*, edited by the aforesaid skeptical Joseph Tinker Buckingham, reported that the “Great Sea Serpent” had “made his annual visit to our harbour,” and certain “scientific gentlemen,” among whom was a “professor from Harvard College and the President of the Linnaean Society” intercepted the creature in a barge. As the now tame Sea Serpent lay supinely on the surface of the water, the scientists measured his length, recording it as being “precisely *five-hundred-twenty-five feet*.” Extrapolating from the documents kept over the centuries and “from the observations and calculations of learned naturalists . . . it grows one foot in a year.” In diameter, the creature was, according to the “unanimous opinion of the gentlemen who inspected it yesterday” approximately twenty feet. In the imagined

⁴³¹ James W. Cook, *Arts of Deception, Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, 17; Jared Gardner, “The Literary Museum and the Unsettling of the Early American Novel,” *ELH*, 67 3, An Americanist Issue in Honor of Larzer Ziff, (Fall, 2000), (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins U P, 2000), 746, 754, *Project Muse*, Sept. 2011

⁴³² As applied to decorative art and sculpture, the grotesque is characterized by “fantastic representations of human and animal forms often combined into formal distortions of the natural to the point of absurdity, ugliness or caricature.” The Sea Serpent was always apprehended as a natural object, even when fictionalized. “Grotesque,” *Handbook to Literature*, Eighth Edition, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1999), 239-240

future, the New England academic and scientific community gets what it wants from the phenomenon and the creature together. Given the Sea Serpent's actual phlegmatic temper, he retreated from an irritant than attacked it, matched with the desire of the scientists for concrete evidence, the story, though futuristic, is neither grotesque nor fantastic.⁴³³

In 1823, another writer whose story ran first in Vermont and then in Haverhill, Massachusetts, was dated and headlined "Boston. September 11, 1855* Sea Serpent Caught!" The "New-York Phlogobombos Society" had offered a half-million dollars to any "person or persons who would take him [the Sea Serpent] dead or alive . . ." The story began in a tone similar to the pronouncement of Capt. Richard Rich, in his published letter of 1818, that he was confident "means were within the power of man, if rightly used, to overthrow this monster . . ." The 1823 story tells us that the "monster of the deep has at last yielded to the power of man." Most of the story concentrates on the technology by which the Serpent was caught in 1855. The capture was made possible by a "newly-constructed Extra-patent steamboat," whose motion was "equal to that of the flight of an eagle" excited attention, "wonder, and admiration "at its extreme velocity." The first people to see the new ship were Bostonians, as Capt. Huryall, started the expedition from "this harbor, [Boston] for Cape Ann on Monday last." Huryall's Extra-patent steamboat encountered the Sea Serpent "with his humps drawn up in battle array . . ." After an assault with steam rockets, which the Sea Serpent found

⁴³³ "Anticipations," *New England Galaxy and Masonic Magazine*, 7 Aug. 1818.

objectionable, the creature did what he often did in the reports, “he fled with his usual precipitation.”⁴³⁴

And while the pursuers were using their speedy new steamboat and rockets, “several gentlemen of this city” were curious to see the contest, and so they made their own “aerial excursion, on the newly invented Bennet’s double improved patent Wings . . .” They all safely returned from their flight, except one who “alighted, and came in on board the boat.” In Boston, thousands of people were waiting for the Sea Serpent, who was “nearly lifeless” after his struggle. In human hands at last, the length and shape of the Sea Serpent could be explained simply. It was found, shortly after his capture, that the creature had “swallowed a whole freight of casks,” and his ingenious digestive system placed the smaller ones at each of his ends, the largest in the center of his 200-foot length. Further bits of information about him were unobtainable because of a happy gridlock that afternoon in the streets of Boston.⁴³⁵

While “Anticipations” shows us the Sea Serpent as a cooperative living specimen to the naturalists over a period of centuries, the “Sea Serpent Caught” is an idealized version of Captain Rich’s capture and exhibit, and, in its conclusion, suggests the excitement Rich’s Horse Mackerel caused in September, 1818. The commotion caused by Rich’s supposed capture of the Sea Serpent rivaled that

⁴³⁴ “Boston. September 11, 1855.,” *American Repertory*, [Albans, VT], II 43, (9/4/1823), 2; “The Sea Serpent.,” *Salem Gazette*, 15 Sept. 1818; “Boston. September 11, 1855.,” *Haverhill Gazette*, 5 Sept. 1823

⁴³⁵ “Boston. September 11, 1855.,” *Haverhill Gazette*, 5 Sept. 1823

caused by the news of the peace at Belgium in 1815. One man coming from Gloucester tired out two horses “on the road with his rapid travelling.” After the traveler arrived, there were reports answering “all shapes and dimensions” that were mostly false. Still, all agreed that the Serpent had been captured, brought in by the “unexampled enterprise and intrepidity of Yankee Whalemen.” The *Providence Gazette* of Providence, Rhode Island, headlined its story on September 5, “PLEASING INTELLIGENCE. Capture of the Sea Serpent.”⁴³⁶ The *New-York Daily Advertiser*, having carried a brief report of Rich’s capture, ran another announcement two days later for the Broadway Circus, at which the final exhibit that night would be “a transparent representation of the Sea Serpent, surrounded with fire works—done by an eminent artist for this occasion.”⁴³⁷ The futuristic pieces demonstrate show a realistic element, the desire for an accessible, tame, captured or killed Sea Serpent, and the frustration at continuing to fail in producing one.

Sea Serpent fiction written between 1817 and 1833 predates and does not partake of David S. Reynolds’ “subversive imagination,” and it is only historically related to the “antebellum interest in huge sea monsters” he observed.⁴³⁸ The

⁴³⁶ Most of the reports of the Rich Expedition were carried first by the Nathan Hale’s Boston Daily Advertiser, and both the Providence Patriot and the Providence Gazette transcribed their stories from there.

⁴³⁷ “The Sea Serpent again!,” *Boston Intelligencer*, 5 Sept. 1818;

“Saturday Morning, Sept. 5,” *Providence Gazette*, 5 Sept. 1818;

“THE SEA SERPENT CAUGHT.,” *New-York Daily Advertiser*, 7 Sept. 1818;

“Broadway Circus., Mr. Bullen’s Benefit.,” *New-York Daily Advertiser*, 9 Sept. 1818

⁴³⁸ In his discussion of antebellum sea monster fiction, Reynolds’ only New England Sea Serpent source is Eugene Batchelder’s mixed-form verse novel, *Romance of the Sea Serpent, or, the Icthyosaurus*, 1849. This work, in spite of its postscript collection of Sea Serpentiana, is far removed

fiction written contemporaneously with the sightings of 1817-1825 is, in its content, closer to the tall tale, with its “realistic detail, literal manner, and common speech” that recounts “extravagantly impossible happenings.”⁴³⁹ For instance, it was well known from circulating articles that the Sea Serpent was observed several times in Penobscot Bay before 1817, but no storyteller ever claimed, for example, that the Sea Serpent made the Penobscot River by way of his motion, not even the Abenaki legends of water serpents, gave the actions of the animal such power.

Narrative depends on change, and Sea Serpent writings derive their narrative arcs from human experience and aspiration, and so the Claude mirror is ultimately made to reflect and improve human nature. The human characters in the narratives, just like the fire works in Mr. Bullen’s benefit, change, but the Sea Serpent does not. For example, the writer who discovered, in July, 1818, that the Sea Serpent is the Anaconda of the Ocean did not sail far over the ocean with his team, but quite far in his own reflection about the Sea Serpent and the sighting experience. He based his conclusion first on the “affinity” between terrestrial animals and those in the “vasty deep” and second, on the rare reports in which the Sea Serpent was found to be lying motionless on the water. In the article, he also tells a story about the cruise of a British frigate, on which a large “Serpent,”

in setting and events from the phenomenon in time. In its fantastic recreation of the phenomenon, the novel can be justly called lurid and grotesque, and so it partakes more of the interests of its own time than 1817-1825. David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1986), 194-5

⁴³⁹ “Tall Tale,” *A Handbook to Literature*, 8th Edition, William Harmon, C. Hugh Holman, eds. (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000), 513

procured from an island in the Indian Ocean, after being fed, was satiated for five days. In that time, the predator “lay in a stupor,” his body distended.⁴⁴⁰

In its setting and conclusion, “Anaconda of the Ocean” is fictional, but in its rhetoric and conclusion, it employs and appeals to the lay discourse of natural history, which Andrew J. Lewis called the democracy of facts. With his team, and on the ocean in their ship, the author observed feeding behavior, the Sea Serpent’s “jaws were opened to a frightful dimension,” as a group of porpoises, “impelled by . . . careless and playful impetuosity,” leapt into the creature’s “voracious maw.” Once gorged by the “flying repast,” the Serpent lay “extended, dormant, and immoveable. Here then was a confirmation of my hypothesis.” The writer’s only authority is the experience of his journey. The narrative, a cool one in hot rhetoric, is one that contains scientific argumentation, there is a purpose, description of materials, statements of hypothesis, procedure, results and a conclusion, and so here is a Sea Serpent inquiry, individualized, carried out, and concluded with the shout, “I have made a great discovery!” The learned naturalists’ inquiry could carry no such boast.⁴⁴¹

In October, 1818, the Sea Serpent became part of a young man’s search for prosperity. Though the story is printed, the reader must imagine it as hand-written, a message placed in a bottle, because Nicodemus has yet to emerge from his long night inside two Sea Serpents. Nantucket was a crewman aboard the small

⁴⁴⁰ “Sag Harbor, N.Y., July 10, 1818,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, [Washington, DC], 18 Jul. 1818; “Sea Serpent Off Portland!,” *Eastern Argus* [Portland, ME] 30 Jun. 1818

⁴⁴¹ “Sag Harbor, N.Y., July 10, 1818,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, [Washington, DC], 18 Jul. 1818;

schooner, the *Sea Serpent*, which was “weathering off Cape Cod,” when “a squall” dismasted the ship. Next morning, “a monstrous thing with its head out of the water” came right toward the *Sea Serpent* with “its jaws wide open.” Nantucket and his compatriots were terrified at first, but then they saw that the *Sea Serpent*’s “eye had a mild expression, and seemed to half smile upon us.” Nantucket loaded his “musket” nonetheless, and fired into the creature’s mouth, a “huge red cave” that closed completely over the ship and everything in it. In spite of being swallowed by the *Sea Serpent*, the fears of the *Sea Serpent*’s crew were “much abated” because had they not been swallowed, prevailing conditions would have dashed the dismasted ship to pieces on the shore, with “all lost.” Though it has the shape of a Jonah myth, the story parts company with Jonah in that there is no profound message between God and man to be drawn from the insides of a living *Sea Serpent*.⁴⁴²

Instead, there are trappings of the Atlantic past, travel, opportunities, and a buoyant attitude about the future. Nicodemus struck a light, and, examining “the premises,” sees that the creature’s gut looked like “a grotto—shells of every description . . .” A trunk of Spanish papers is cast on the schooner’s stern, but Nantucket could not read them. From the bowsprit, a boy could see Montauk Point, and “while the world was spinning round . . . we were standing still.” As a

⁴⁴² “Nicodemus Nantucket,” “From the N.Y. National Advocate,” *Essex Register* [Salem, MA], 17 Oct. 1818;

“Nicodemus Nantucket,” “From the National Advocate,” *Essex Patriot* [Haverhill, MA], 31 Oct. 1818;

“Nicodemus Nantucket,” “From the National Advocate,” *National Aegis* [Worcester, MA], 28 Oct. 1818;

“Nicodemus Nantucket,” “[National Advocate],” *Portland Gazette* [Portland, ME], 3 Nov. 1818

singular creature, the Sea Serpent eats several singular fish off Albany fort, and the *Sea Serpent's* crew salts some of them to exhibit later for profit. The Serpent swims rapidly, of course, and at about two o'clock in the afternoon, they arrive at the North Pole, and saw "no ice," but an island of mermaids "covered with trees of great height in blossom." Nantucket meets the girl of his dreams when "Snorter," the nickname the *Sea Serpent's* crew gives the Sea Serpent, swallows five islanders, and Nantucket saves two, a father and his sixteen-year-old, green-haired daughter from the creature's digestive tract. "If I can get his [the father's] consent, and the deacon of the town will marry us, I will marry her in spite of her tail" because by the time Nantucket's feet strike the land again, he "shall be rich enough to ride in a carriage with her."⁴⁴³

Nantucket intends to put messages in bottles, quite literally bottling the Sea Serpent, until there is a general turnout of ships from the port of New York to scour the Atlantic in such a way that the Sea Serpent can be found, the schooner can be extricated, and he can begin his new, affluent life on land. The *Essex Register* ran the New York story to show their readers "a specimen of the manner in which our Southern friends play off their jokes about the Sea Serpent . . ." When we hear the word "Southern" from Warwick Palfray of certain contemporary works about the Sea Serpent, I suggest here that he and many of the New England editors are using "Southern" as meaning not from the six New England states. For instance, the

⁴⁴³ "Nicomemus Nantucket," "From the N.Y. National Advocate," *Essex Register* [Salem, MA], 17 Oct. 1818

Boston Intelligencer, when it carried the June 1819 Sea Serpent report of one Hawkins Wheeler, put it just behind a piece stating that “Northern editors . . .” will again be “subjected to the keen irony, and sapient remarks of certain Southern gentlemen,” because of the “revival of the story of a Sea Serpent in our waters.” By June, 1819, even Captain Rich’s much bruited-about Sea Serpent knowledge is discredited by the new report, because he had said that should the Sea Serpent appear again after Sept. 1818, he would “believe the *Albacore*” he had caught “was not the monster seen by the Gloucester people.” The *Yankee*, of Boston, in August, 1818, printed a letter from the *Franklin Gazette* published in Philadelphia to show how the “Southern papers make considerable sport of the expeditions fitted out for the capture of the Serpent.”⁴⁴⁴

Continuing his comment on Nantucket’s story, in October, 1818, Palfray lamented not being able to publish a report of the Sea Serpent again on the northern Massachusetts coast immediately after the Rich Expedition, “but the testimony of respectable witnesses, solemnly attested is not to be shaken by bagatelles and burlesque, however humorous and witty.” The two New York City stories, of all the Sea Serpent literature, resemble the tall tale, but only partially. As voyage narratives, they are realistic, there is nothing about their crews and ships that stretches credibility, Nicodemus and the narrator of “Anaconda of the Ocean” are ordinary men, whose advantages lay not in superior strength or paranormal

⁴⁴⁴ “The Sea Serpent Again Near Cape-Ann,” *Boston Intelligencer*, 12 Jun. 1819; “The Sea Serpent, *The Yankee* [Boston, MA], 27 Aug. 1818

powers, but in their resourcefulness, knowledge, experience, and aspirations. In “Anaconda of the Ocean” the hero wishes only to acquire knowledge, his search for concrete evidence continues at the story’s end, and so the story reflects the human progress of the phenomenon.

In Nantucket’s story, the language is literal, the Sea Serpent, the schooner, the indecipherable Spanish papers have no operation beyond their presence. The Spanish papers, particularly, indicate history, but because their content is never revealed, they carry no meaning beyond their language, and Nicodemus just puts them down. His fortune will be made by exhibiting the “singular fish” the Sea Serpent is eating, and his happiness will be secured by marrying a mermaid, a creature he will be able to accommodate. Nantucket’s narrative is about the creation of spectacle, on the page and in New York City, where, throughout the first two years of the phenomenon, panoramas and exhibits of various kinds played up its spectacular aspects for anywhere between twenty-five and fifty cents per person admitted.⁴⁴⁵

New Englanders were not indifferent to the potential of the Sea Serpent sighting as commodity and performance when, in Boston on April 23, 1821, the “Theatre” re-opened. Its fare that night was a comedy titled The Heir at Law, then a “New Musical Farce” titled Sharp and Flat, or—the Natural Outwitted, and finally, there was a Comic Pantomime titled The Sea Serpent, or, Harlequin in Gloucester. The Sea Serpent was congenial to the harlequinade or pantomime, an English low

⁴⁴⁵ “The Sea Serpent,” *Essex Register* [Salem, MA], 17 Oct. 1818;

comic theatrical form derived from the Early Modern Commedia Dell'Arte that was very popular in Colonial British America and the Early Republic. The culture of the Early Republic, as expressed by literary intellectuals, was exacting about just what made the harlequinade worth watching. Joseph Dennie, in 1802, reviewed a re-performance of a pantomime called Harlequin Invasion, in this way, "justice obliges us to speak harshly . . . the proverbial patience of a Philadelphia audience was exhausted before the curtain dropped" upon a "*mangled* entertainment, in which neither *memory*, nor *judgment*, nor *fancy* appeared to take any part." Dennie's review indicates that American audiences were not just lowbrow mobs throwing their trash onto other audience-members or the stage, nor did the theater serve only the purpose of cruising for prostitutes. Just as Lawrence Levine found these audiences to be intelligent and appreciative of the subtleties of Shakespeare, Dennie's review indicates that they brought intelligence and textured expectations to the theatrical experience, even when no lines were spoken. The contemporary culture of New England, if read through the editorial voice of Joseph Tinker Buckingham in 1809, was suspicious of this highly imaginative and undidactic type of performance. "Of all the perversions of taste . . . in relation to poetry, eloquence, painting, architecture, the stage . . . we cannot call to mind any more striking absurdity than that passion for extravagant show, and nonsensical pantomimick exhibitions which are the fashion of the times."⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁶Joseph Dennie, "The Drama. For the Port Folio," *The Port Folio*, 1801-1827, 2 3, (Jan 23, 1802), 17, American Periodicals Series II, Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*;

By 1828, something in New England culture's apprehension of non-didactic theater had changed, because another commentator on the pantomime stated that "not to like pantomimes, is not to like animal spirits; it is not to like motion; not to like love; not to like a jest upon dullness and formality . . . not to sympathize with one's children; [and] not to remember that we have been children ourselves . . ." In the harlequinade, the characters begin in a contemporary setting, each having a specific identity, and then, as the plot builds in tension, a magical character waves a wand, there is perhaps a cymbal crash, and then all the characters and setting of the first story change, via costume and action, into the Commedia Dell'Arte stock characters. On the Anglo-American stage, Columbine is "a boarding school girl, ripe for running away with," and Harlequin, her lover, is "a gallant adventurer," who can "convert the scrapes he gets in, to matters of jest and triumph." Pantaloon, her stiff, overbearing father is an "old miser from some manufacturing town," and Clown, his obtuse stooge, is a "London Cockney with a prodigious eye for his own comfort and muffins." Some idea of the transformation can be understood by way of The Sea Serpent! or, Harlequin Yankee, a performance at the Surrey Theatre in England, in September 5, 1819.⁴⁴⁷

Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1988), 4,
<http://books.google.com/books?id=cdIYw2Z0OXsC&lpg=PP1&dq=highbrow%2C%20lowbrow&pg=PA4#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, accessed 3-2014;
 Joseph Tinker Buckingham, *The Ordeal; a Critical Journal of Politicks and Literature*, (1809-1809), 18 (May 6, 1809), 285, American Periodicals Series II, Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*, accessed 2-2014

⁴⁴⁷ "Theatre. Mr. Bray's Benefit.," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 18 Apr. 1821;

In Harlequin Yankee, a young woman, Squinacoosla, is betrothed to a native chief, confined by an enchantment, and guarded by the Sea Serpent. The plot intensifies when her lover, Onondago, is frustrated by his “imprudent loss of a talisman” intended to free her, as Squinacoosla persistently refuses the lover that has been offered to her by the enchanter. In other words, they are “both devoted.” Onondago is devoured by the large reptile, and as Squinacoosla is waiting to be devoured with him, the “kind fairy of the talisman appears . . .,” and brings Onondago back. The fairy tells the lovers to wander until they find the talisman again. Squinacoosla becomes Columbine, Onondago, Harlequin, and “the usual pantomimic adventures commence, wherein much mirth, beautiful scenery, and good mechanism are displayed . . .” The talisman is recovered, and the enchanters are all turned into Lover, Pantaloon and a Clown, and so “become the prey of the Sea Snake.” The crowd, we are told, loved it. Whether or not the English performance helped inspire Boston’s Harlequin in Gloucester, we will never know.⁴⁴⁸

The Sea Serpent would not be seen on the American stage again until 1833, in James Robinson Planché’s burletta extravaganza, The Deep, Deep Sea, or,

“Pantomime,” *The Atheneum; or, Spirit of the English Magazines* (1817-1833), 9 2, (Apr. 15, 1828), 59, American Periodicals, Series II, Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*, accessed 2-2014

⁴⁴⁸“The Drama., from the European Magazine, October, 1818,” *The Atheneum; or, Spirit of the English Magazines*, 4 8, (Jan. 15, 1819), 322, Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*; *The Atheneum: Spirit of the English Magazines*, Vol. IV, Oct. 1818-April 1819, (Boston: Munroe, Francis, 1819), 322 <http://books.google.com/books?id=8mU-AQAAMAAJ&dq=harlequin%20sea%20serpent&pg=PA322#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, accessed 3-2014;

Perseus and Andromeda; an Original, Mythological, Aquatic, Equestrian Burletta IN

ONE ACT, 1833, a retelling of the myth of Perseus and Andromeda in which the Sea Serpent appears, “a Yankee-Doodle *come* to Town—“half man,” with a Sea-gar in his mouth—“half horse,” with an azure *mane*—and “half alligator” with an endless *tale*.” The play was popular in England and made an American premiere at the Park Theatre in New York City on November, 29, 1834. Theatrical columns in the *Knickerbocker; or, New York Monthly Magazine* indicate that it was still being performed in New York City in 1846 and perhaps even as late as 1851. As a representation of the Sea Serpent, this character, unlike the other representations in this chapter, is an English rendering of a bumptious American, more in the mould of Andrew Jackson, and as such, carries no association with any element of the Sea Serpent experience of New England with him.⁴⁴⁹

The Sea Serpent phenomenon was part of several larger shifts in Western, American, and New England cultures. The first of these was the changing perceptions of the ocean and shore, which, we found, took place very slowly between the seventeenth and mid-nineteenth-centuries. By 1817, people living in coastal Massachusetts had an interest in seeing the Sea Serpent for themselves,

⁴⁴⁹ James Robinson Planché, The Deep, Deep Sea, or, Perseus and Andromeda; An Original, Mythological, Aquatic, Equestrian Burletta in One Act, *The Extravaganzas of J.R. Planché*, T.F. Dillon Croker, Stephen Tucker eds. 5 volumes. (London: French, 1879), *Literature Online, English Verse Drama Full-Text Database*, (Cambridge: Chadwick-Healey), accessed 3-2009; “Notices of the Drama . . .,” *New-York Mirror, a Weekly Gazette of Literature*. . . , 12 22, (Nov. 29, 1834), 175, *American Periodicals Series Online*, 3-2014; “Review 2—No Title,” *The Knickerbocker; or, New York Monthly Magazine*, 27 2, (Feb. 1846), 186, Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*, 3-2014; The character of the American Sea Serpent was burlesqued in “A Tribute to the American Sea Serpent.: Speech,” *The Knickerbocker; or, New York Monthly Magazine*, 39 6, (Jun. 1852), 557, Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*, 3-2014

and through the sources, we observed them on the beach in large groups at Cape Ann, Gloucester, Lynn and Swampscott between 1817 and 1819. The phenomenon provided justification for longer, thoughtful encounters with the sea and shore, and even on the sea itself by way of daily cruises between Nahant and Boston in the 1820s. Interest in seeing the Serpent had several cultural implications, it prompted the painting of several panoramas, and one large, transparent slide, the writing of William Crafts' verse play, and the performance of two pantomimes, one in England in 1818, the other in Boston in 1821. Penniman's panorama, after Charles Willson Peale bought it, was exhibited the following spring at Philadelphia's "State House." Peale's museum as shown in that year, suggests that he favored artistic production over quasi-scientific collecting for the discourse of fact, an indication of the larger cultural influence of the specializing tendency in natural history collecting in the early nineteenth-century observed in our second chapter. The Sea Serpent painting was shown with the "stupendous skeleton of a Mammoth," several wax figures "of Indians &c. habited in their own dresses, Instruments of war," and 800 dresses. The Sea Serpent brought together the artistic and commercial aspects of culture, and the sources for this chapter represent the tangible results of public interest in seeing the Sea Serpent, the essential dynamic of the phenomenon.⁴⁵⁰

The commercial and literary aspects of the Sea Serpent phenomenon, particularly in its most intense years, show also how the uses of literature and

⁴⁵⁰ "Peale's Museum," (Philadelphia, 1818), Broadside, S45294, Worcester, MA: *Early American Imprints, Series II, Shaw-Shoemaker*, American Antiquarian Society, 2004.

reading in the society broadened, by way of print and content together, from creating citizenship toward the creation of a trade in literary products that served a new society with more leisure time at its disposal by the 1830s. The discourse of fact was supplemented by the discourse of spectacle and fiction, and yet the phenomenon itself was not depicted in fantastic terms, instead, the literature magnified factual aspects of it here and there.

The question of whether or not the Sea Serpent was a worthy subject for scientific inquiry was constantly posed in the first half of the nineteenth-century. As the sighting reports were collected between 1817 and 1819, and “increased exploration of the sea combined with paleontological finds suggested that the ‘mythical’ sea monster” might really exist, for a short time, study of the Sea Serpent became science. As the inquiry quieted down, such a question of validity was never posed about the literary development of the phenomenon, writing did not have to pass muster with any organized university, cross-Atlantic community or society. Marshall McLuhan argued that tribal peoples, in their relationships with nature, invested it with “spiritual energy” in lieu of “translating nature into art.” When “we,” that is, people living in modern civilized societies, “fail to translate some natural event or experience into conscious art we ‘repress’ it.” The literati of New England and New York City did the cultural work of translating the Sea Serpent into image and narrative terms; and they had it their way with the Sea Serpent. Yet, in their depictions, they stayed very close to the phenomenon as understood by the

communities of coastal New England by way of the hot medium, the reports, and so they helped keep the event of seeing the Serpent resonant in collective memory.⁴⁵¹

The early fiction, futurism and drama of the Sea Serpent were centered on the phenomenon itself as much as the reports and published correspondence of David Humphreys. The discourse of fiction grew up in the edifice of the discourse of fact, and the growth of imaginative writing demonstrates how the Sea Serpent phenomenon cooled as a medium and became increasingly subject to elaboration. The elaboration began within its first year, and by 1833, one story used the spectacle of the Sea Serpent sighting as a performance on the ocean for the passengers of the steamboat *Connecticut*. Through this narrative of narratives, performances and exhibits, we have seen how those wishing to turn the Sea Serpent to some kind of profit, cooled him down such that they created different scenarios for the phenomenon. No longer would human beings just see or dismiss the Serpent and talk to the editor, the pantomime, exhibits and stories made human beings interactive in the presence of the Serpent. Having made the Serpent's reality imaginative, the writers adventurously empowered their protagonists to gather knowledge and theorize from what is apparent, to take advantage of opportunities, meet, and aspire to marry a beautiful mermaid. As cooled down and humanized, the Sea Serpent became yet more malleable as the years passed, and subsequent literary expressions using the phenomenon as source

⁴⁵¹ Sherrie Lyons, *Species, Serpents, Spirits and Skulls*, 18; Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, First MIT Press Edition, (Cambridge, MA, London: MIT Press, 1994), 59

material, however uncommon, added notes of profundity to the experience of the Sea Serpent.

CONCLUSION

Whenever the Sea Serpent appeared, conjectures about his nature, origins and even his imagined social position in the sea, abounded. His appearances were, after 1819, increasingly uncommon; but some years were better than others. Where 1817-1819 were the years in which there were the most sightings reported, 1821, 1827, 1831 and 1833 were also good years for the Sea Serpent. Mostly English naturalists, geologists, and paleontologists, using deductive or theoretical methods, carried on the scientific inquiry, in those years. Charles Lyell and Richard Owen, in constructing their own theoretical understanding of the progress of life on earth by examining fossil remains, kept Sea Serpent reports from Scandinavia, New England and elsewhere. Owen involved himself publicly in one British Sea Serpent controversy in 1848, and spent the remainder of his career discrediting the imposition of legal evidentiary procedures upon the practice of science along with Charles Darwin's theory of Evolution through Natural Selection. In their way, Lyell and Owen re-constructed the Sea Serpent's private, curio-cabinet existence of the late eighteenth and first decade of the nineteenth-century.

Simultaneously, the Sea Serpent's literary meanings became ramified as journalists and professional writers found ways of using the Sea Serpent and his imagined world in their works. In the essays and poems of 1817-1825, the Sea Serpent is often called "His Snakeship," and a monarch of the ocean. A few antebellum writers decided that the Sea Serpent, as a monarch, should have a

submarine court in their works, and in that era, the Sea Serpent came to represent monarchical and, in a democratic and republican context, the power of the individual as circumscribed by the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. But the United States was not a nation of citizens alone, there were the “persons” of the Constitution, the most afflicted and debased of whom were the slaves. As a slave, the individual did not belong to himself, and slavery was understood in the North in terms of captivity, an experience that was singularly bitter in colonial New England history, and in October, 1836, William Lloyd Garrison published an anonymous poem, “Lines to the Sea Serpent,” that spoke to this point. At Nahant, the speaker mentions the hotel and the guests there, and warns the Sea Serpent that there, “hast thou foes . . . who meditate thy ruin and captivity . . .” And in case the creature is too innocent to understand the meaning of captivity, dark realities of human ambitions and American life, the speaker defines captivity as “a degradation worse, oh, worse than death . . .,” for his captors would “palsy all thy vigor and activity” by confinement and restraint, and “there *exhibit* thee! Oh, what disgrace!”⁴⁵²

After the Sea Serpent’s capture, the speaker imagines serious political repercussions in the creature’s submarine domain; his country would be racked with chaos, rebellion, and war as “rival leviathans would wag their tails . . . an awful submarine commotion” resulting in “a war of succession on the ocean.” The

⁴⁵² “Lines to the Sea Serpent,” *The Liberator*, 6 42, (Oct. 15, 1836), 168, *American Periodicals Series Online*, 4-2014

speaker advises him, then, to “avoid this wild misrule, by keeping snugly in your element . . . Forsake it, and you will become man’s minion.” The poem addresses the Sea Serpent’s marginality or otherness in human experience and knowledge, along with his agency in his element, the sea. These are analogous to the historically endemic alienation between the races, between free and unfree persons, and make the argument that for a human being to be free is as congruous with nature as the Serpent’s life in the sea. Therefore, slavery is artifice, a cruel machination of a society that has rejected nature. The Sea Serpent, like the slave, is marginal, and yet possesses certain powers in himself that the slave does not. His most important powers are his self-possession, and his ability to acquire, by way of merit or strength, the right to lead as a monarch, the creatures of his own community. The message is also clear that to preserve the freedom of the Sea Serpent is to preserve the peace of the Sea Serpent’s submarine country, and in essence, the order of nature itself. Readily perceptible is the Sea Serpent’s mediumistic cultural work as the creature contains the antislavery argument, allowing its framing in terms of natural theology, natural history, and natural rights.⁴⁵³

The role of the Sea Serpent is inverted from free citizen to tyrant-monster in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s tale titled “Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent,” 1841, which includes, as central characterizing and narrative structures, three aspects of the

⁴⁵³ “Lines to the Sea Serpent,” *The Liberator*, 6 42, (Oct. 15, 1836), 168, *American Periodicals Series Online*, 4-2014

historical Sea Serpent phenomenon, the first of which is the sighting event. The tale's central character, Roderick Elliston internalizes a serpent, which is the expression of his destructive jealousy in love. Hawthorne's physical description of Elliston shows two Sea Serpent features, his glittering eyes and, most important, his gait, which seems to "imitate the motion of a snake; for instead of walking straight forward with open front, he undulated along the pavement in a curved line."⁴⁵⁴

Elliston, like the poets for the *Salem Gazette*, *Connecticut Journal*, Jonathan, in 1817, and Alonzo Lewis in 1829, gives his own serpent several identities that are, like the profusion of the Sea Serpent's names, attempts to fit him into a larger, but individually-generated pattern of understanding. The narrator observes that Elliston calls it "the symbol of a monstrous egotism," then, it seems he imagined that the snake was divine, but nonetheless "darkly infernal." The narrator, after his description of Elliston's mental ramblings, concluded that from them, the "snake-possessed" acquired in his own eyes "an eminence and sanctity, horrid, indeed, yet more desirable than whatever ambition aims at."⁴⁵⁵

For a certain period, Elliston meanders, with his undulatory gait, the streets of the city where he lives and identifies by sight, various types of serpents and sins in the bosoms of all the people he meets with the exception of two. The serpents themselves are apparent in Elliston's eyes, while the narrator only suggests their

⁴⁵⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, 12 57, (Mar. 1843), Ann Arbor, MI: *American Periodicals Series Online*, 255, 4-2014

⁴⁵⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent"

objective reality. By the serpents, Elliston defines the frailty of others in the context of his own malady, contained by the bosom serpent, which represented for him “the type of each man’s fatal error, or hoarded sin, or unquiet conscience . . .” Since, through his undulations abroad, he had seen so much of frailty, affliction and sin, Elliston became aggressive in his approach to the serpents he saw, for he “grappled with the ugliest truth that he could lay his hand on and compelled his adversary to do the same.” The townspeople grew weary of the spectacle Elliston made of himself and the serpents, and it ended when his relatives put him into an asylum.⁴⁵⁶

Elliston is cured when he encounters his wife, and Hawthorne describes the event in terms similar to the September 1818 general comments in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* upon Sea Serpent reports. “At that moment, if report be trustworthy, . . . [there was] a waving motion through the grass, and . . . a tinkling sound, as if something had plunged into the fountain.” Rosina, Elliston’s wife, did not see it, and concludes at the tale’s end that the serpent was a “dark fantasy,” resolving that “the past, dismal as it seems, shall fling no gloom upon the future.” The existence of the serpent in the tale, like that of the Sea Serpent, is uncertain, confirmed only by descriptive evidence. Even at the end, where one might imagine the serpent swimming away into the fountain, the sentence begins with the conditional phrase, “if report be trustworthy . . .” While it is easy to conclude that Elliston made his own misery, it is also evident that his misery, his bosom serpent,

⁴⁵⁶Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent”

went far in re-making him. From it, he experienced unusual perception, put together a belief system and a mythos to explain the sinfulness he saw in the people around him. His communicated observations hit so close to home concerning the truth of human frailty that they create unease in his auditors. So while Elliston ostensibly contains the serpent physically, the serpents Elliston creates by his imagination, contain the sources of his own suffering; so the stranger, human and serpent, is made through mythos, to tell the truth.⁴⁵⁷

Though the internalized serpent is a recognizable folk motif, and in Hawthorne's hands, a literary borrowing from the universal, human mythos as constructed by twentieth-century mythologist Joseph Campbell, Hawthorne was, for most of his career, a regionalist New England author. His works, though they include universally valid observations of human nature and invoke myth and folklore, are focused tightly on the landscape of coastal Massachusetts, a landscape always divided between the sea and shore in society, economy, and culture as well as topography. Sea Serpent articles appearing in the Salem newspapers, the *Essex Register* and the *Salem Gazette*, which perceptibly influenced the writing of Hawthorne's own *Spectator* in 1820, were headlined "The Sea Serpent," and to imagine "The Bosom Serpent" as being derived from this repetition over a period of years suggests the presence of a kind of echo in the cavern of memory, and a

⁴⁵⁷ Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent"

literary stage whisper akin to the earlier political stage whisper observed by Alison LaCroix in our third chapter.⁴⁵⁸

The people of New England made similar use of the Sea Serpent between 1817 and 1833, as a medium, first, to contain the tensions of the conflicted past, to contain and even celebrate their aspirations for the future, and to express their desires. During the 1840 election campaign season, Whig activist Fitz Henry Lane, a Gloucester native and, in the present day, recognized as one of the most important artists of the Early Republic, painted an image of the Sea Serpent, its head prominently out of water, on a “large banner” inscribed with the words, “The Deep has Felt the Attack Upon Her Interests and sends Her Champion to the Rescue.” Like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Lane had experienced the Sea Serpent phenomenon on the Massachusetts coast as an adolescent. The Sea Serpent was included in the New England community histories written in the antebellum and mid-nineteenth-century; Alonzo Lewis’s *History of Lynn, Including Nahant*, 1829, 1844, John J. Babson’s *History of the Town of Gloucester Including Rockport*, 1860, included

⁴⁵⁸ “Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind.” Through myth-making, “the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation.” Joseph Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Series, XVII, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 1949, 1968), 3; Arlin Turner, “Hawthorne’s Literary Borrowings,” *PMLA*, 51 2, (Jun. 1936), 543, 550, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/458069> JSTOR, 9-2011; Daniel R. Barnes, “The Bosom Serpent: A Legend in American Literature and Culture,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 85 336, (Apr.-Jun., 1972), 111-122, esp. 113-114, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/539243> JSTOR, 9-2011; Alison LaCroix, “A Singular and Awkward War: The Transatlantic Context of the Hartford Convention,” *American Nineteenth-Century History*, 6 1, (March, 2005), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=921643 Social Science Research Newtork, 4-2014

discussions of the Sea Serpent, even though many other antiquarian, marine and scientific societies of the era ignored the phenomenon. The *Annals of Nahant*, 1929, also discusses the Sea Serpent, and the credulous and incredulous stance among the public over the course of the entire nineteenth-century, in some detail.⁴⁵⁹

The Sea Serpent sightings on the Massachusetts coast, David S. Reynolds tells us, influenced the making of an antebellum, “pre-Melvillian preoccupation with mythic sea monsters in a body of overlooked nautical adventure novels.” The American public, readers, were in turn extraordinarily fascinated with “mythic sea monsters and such monsters were treated with particular liveliness in Dark Adventure novels.” The development and content of this particular body of works, Reynolds argues convincingly, directly influenced the writing of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, 1851. Only one of Reynolds’ examples of nautical Dark Adventure involves the Sea Serpent, all the others are about the better-known and more common human interaction with whales.⁴⁶⁰

Reynolds’ only Sea Serpent text is the mixed-form novel titled *Romance of the Sea Serpent, or, the Ichthyosaurus*, 1849, by Eugene Batchelder, which stands apart from the earlier sources because it is a grotesque fantasy, and not fiction. “Lines to the Sea Serpent” and “Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent,” along with all the

⁴⁵⁹ Dunlap Sarah V., Stephanie Buck, *Fitz Henry Lane: Family and Friends*, (Gloucester, MA: Church, Mason, Cape Ann Historical Museum, 2007), 46

⁴⁶⁰ David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1986), 194-195

sources of the preceding chapter, are examples of fictional treatments of the Sea Serpent because they all contain recognizable elements of the historical phenomenon in spite of their imagined narratives. The fictional work, despite its not being drawn directly from “history or fact,” nonetheless often imaginatively elaborates incidents and personalities drawn from history or experience. Fiction is also defined, in terms of authorial intent, as “any literary construction” written to the purpose of imposing order on a “flux of thought or experience . . .” In other words, fiction, though imaginative or allegorical, is written through a rational process and can contain history or fact without being history or fact, just as myths and epics often simultaneously convey powerful philosophical and common sense truths.⁴⁶¹

On the other hand, fantasy and the grotesque describe Eugene Batchelder’s *The Ichthyosaurus* in terms of the Sea Serpent’s personality and activities, particularly if one contrasts the events of the novel with the events of 1817-1825. In Batchelder’s novel, the Sea Serpent is truly a tyrant-monster, because instead of “making his appearance” off Nahant, he slithers onto the land and attacks the bathers, men, women and children alike, and the hotel so ferociously that when he was gone “sad the scene and mournful the sight the ladies saw at Nahant that night; dead and drowned and wounded men were found wherever the snake had been.” Another significant difference is that the observers of the Sea Serpent in

⁴⁶¹ “Fiction,” *A Handbook to Literature*, Eighth Edition, William Harmon, C. Hugh Holman, eds., (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999), 212

Batchelder's novel compose a new leisure class that has grown up going to schools like Harvard and vacationing in places like Nahant and Newport, Rhode Island. These characters own and enjoy a swift yacht called "*Hope, the Queen of the Sea*," and absent is David Humphreys' and Charles Lenox Sargent's Gloucester dynamic of 1817, walking alongside the ocean and taking out one's "good glass" to find driftwood. Instead, Batchelder shows us "four figures, enjoying their mild cigars, on the quarter-deck in silence sat. . . near them, a little abaft the hatch, a group of ladies lean o'er her painted sides, the stars to watch . . ." The Sea Serpent, as he appeared in the early nineteenth-century, aroused the fascination of observers so much that editors found their narratives newsworthy. In Batchelder's work, at Nahant and at Harvard, the Sea Serpent brings lethal violence and chaos even to the staid environs of Harvard College. ". . . all the professors, students, and men in Cambridge fought with the serpent then; however his Snakeship," as he departed, scrambling down the street and "into the tide," he "knocked down a shed on the college wharf, killing two men at their work inside."⁴⁶²

The creature and New Englanders of Batchelder's work are different from the people who observed and wrote about the Sea Serpent in the preceding chapters because the majority of them are wealthy and in search of leisure. The Sea Serpent is a violently destructive caricature, capable of moving great distances on land, using language with at least one human being; and by virtue of these

⁴⁶² Eugene Batchelder, *Romance of the Sea Serpent, or, the Ichthyosaurus*, (Cambridge, MA: Bartlett, 1849), 38, 77, <http://books.google.com/books?id=cpYvAAAAAYAAJ&dq=eugene%20batchelder&pg=PA38#v=onepage&q&f=false> Google Books, 4-2014

features, it is appropriate to call the character and its narratives grotesque and inauthentic, particularly by nineteenth-century standards of literary criticism, and by the historical context we have observed in the report and commentary literature about the Sea Serpent just post 1817. But, more important, Batchelder's novel crosses the line from fiction to fantasy because it does not resemble the sighting narratives, nor was it written to the purpose of ordering any stream of thoughts or experiences. Instead, in the apprehension of *The Ichthyosaurus*, we can see clearly the "conscious breaking free from reality," even if that reality was previously fictionalized, that is the essence of fantasy. As such, the novel depicts some features of antebellum New England, but conveys no interpretation of the region's distinctiveness in terms of the historical Sea Serpent.⁴⁶³

New England was, Joseph Conforti observed, is "a nation within a nation." From the original settlements in Connecticut and coastal Massachusetts, the regional culture was diffused by serial town settlement over a large frontier, and maintained over a period of several centuries. One of the reasons for the coherency, mobility, and continuing validity of New England culture is the broad intellectual platform on which it stands. A platform began to exist as a narrow strip in the intellectual objectives of Biblical exegesis and surviving in the wilderness.

⁴⁶³ ". . . nineteenth-century critics like Walter Bagehot saw the *grotesque* as a deplorable variation from the normal . . ." "Grotesque," *A Handbook to Literature*, Eighth Edition, William Harmon, C. Hugh Holman, eds, (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999), 239-240; "Fantasy," *A Handbook to Literature*, Eighth Edition, 209; "Antebellum interest in huge sea monsters was stimulated initially by numerous reports of sightings of an enormous kraken (sea serpent) off the coast of Gloucester, Massachusetts, between 1817 and 1822. Eventually the Gloucester sightings were fantastically re-created in Eugene Batchelder's adventurous prose poem . . ." David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 195

The project of writing New England identity began with the settlement of the Separatists at Plymouth in 1620, and historicizing settlement remained a consistent practice to the nineteenth-century.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century at the Massachusetts coast, the days of settlement were long past. The frontier the people of Salem, Marblehead, and Cape Ann faced was the ocean, on which they traveled, from which they profited. Still, in the history of the troubled Atlantic between 1790 and 1815, and in Sea Serpent writing, they implied their awareness that the project of making a garden out of the wilderness would not be realized there. The Sea Serpent, as the creature uncaptured and curiosity unclassified, was a medium for the ocean that a beneficent providence had contained. As New Englanders knew how to travel on the ocean, they also understood and expressed, in the very progress of the Sea Serpent phenomenon, the truth that they did not know the ocean itself in any exact manner. In seeing and crystallizing the Sea Serpent in print, whether as the Linnaean Society of New England's *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society* . . . , 1817, or as "The Sea Monster," 1817, by Jonathan, they understood, with one of Pierre Teilhard De Chardin's twentieth-century translators, Simon Bartholomew paraphrased an analysis of language in M. Maritain's study of St. John of the Cross, writing that "the aim of scientific language is to provide exactly defined and unambiguous statements *about* reality; that of poetic language

is to communicate *reality* itself . . . by means of imagery, evocation, tone, and the ambiguity—or rather ambivalence—of paradox, of symbol.”⁴⁶⁴

This understanding, so evident in the texts that tell the story of New England’s literary development, broadened and balanced New England culture between mythos and logos elements, and helped create its intellectual platform early on. New England’s importance in the union and elsewhere would grow through the pursuit of many types of knowledge, and the refinement of the artistic and literary endeavor. We have seen in this work that making room for the Sea Serpent on the printed page did not verify his existence, but it did make him real.

⁴⁶⁴ Joseph A. Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity*, (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001), 81-82;
 David Jaffee, *People of the Wachusett: Greater New England in History and Memory, 1630-1860*, (Ithaca, NY, London: Cornell U P, 1999), 1, 21, 125;
 Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550-1700*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford U P, 2006), 205;
 Mark A. Peterson, *The Price of Redemption: The Spiritual Economy of New England*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford U P, 1997), 10, 11, 68;
 Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, (London: Centenary Press, 1937), 95, 173,
<https://archive.org/details/DegreesOfKnowledge> Archive Dot Org, 4-2014
 Simon Bartholomew, “Translator’s Note,” Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, First Edition, (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 1,
<https://archive.org/details/HymnOfTheUniverse> Archive Dot Org, 4-2014;
 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, [book on line], <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1621&C=1533> 4-2014

APPENDIX I

SOURCE OVERVIEW, DAVID HUMPHREYS' LETTERS

THE LETTERS

Letters ⁴⁶⁵	Date	Place
1	2 Sept. 1817	Boston
2	5 Sept. 1817	Boston
3	13 Sept. 1817	Humphreysville, CT
4	19 Sept. 1817	New York, NY
5	2 Oct. 1817	Boston
Letter to David Humphreys from Lonson Nash, Ius. Pacis, Gloucester, MA	28 Sept. 1817	Gloucester

Source: David Humphreys, *The Letters of David Humphreys . . .*, (New York: Kirk, Mercein, 1817), S41103, *Early American Imprints, Series II, Shaw-Shoemaker*, Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 2004.

⁴⁶⁵ In sequence as they appeared in Humphreys' book.

APPENDIX II

TABLE OF LINNAEAN SOCIETY OF NEW ENGLAND DEPONENTS

Name Deposition Date	Occupation	Sighting Date	
Amos Story 1817	Mariner	10 Aug. 1817	23 Aug.
Solomon Allen 3d 1817	Shipmaster	12-14 Aug. 1817	21 Aug.
Epes Ellery 1817	Shipmaster	14 Aug. 1817	25 Aug.
Wm. H. Foster 1817	Merchant	14 Aug. 1817	27 Aug.
Matthew Gaffney 1817	Ship Carpenter	14 Aug. 1817	28 Aug.
James Mansfield 1817	Merchant	15 Aug. 1817(?)	27 Aug.
John Johnston ⁴⁶⁶ 1817	Youth	17 Aug. 1817	25 Aug.
Wm. B. Pearson 1817	Merchant	18 Aug. 1817	27 Aug.
Sewell Toppan 1817	Mariner	28 Aug. 1817	1 Sept.
Robert Bragg 1817	Mariner	28 Aug. 1817	1 Sept.
William Somerby 1817	Mariner	28 Aug. 1817	30 Aug.

Source: John Davis, Francis C. Gray, Jacob Bigelow. *Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England Concerning a Large Marine Animal, Supposed to be a Serpent*, (Boston, Cummings and Hilliard, 1817), Sections III-XIII, 6-23

⁴⁶⁶ Johnston testified that he was in a boat with Capt. John Corliss, likely one of Charles Lenox Sargent's Gloucester Witnesses.

APPENDIX III

TABLE OF GLOUCESTER WITNESSES INTERVIEWED BY CHARLES LENOX SARGENT,
1817-1818

Name	Sighting Date
John Low ⁴⁶⁷	14 Sept. 1817
Capt. Corlis	17 Aug. 1817
John Somes	14 Aug. 1817
Z. Stevens	14 Aug. 1817
Joseph Moores	14 Aug. 1817
William Saville	17 Aug. 1817
Mary Row	14 Aug. 1817
Susan Stover	10 Aug. 1817
Lydia Wonson	10 Aug. 1817
Samuel Wonson	14 Aug. 1817
William Row	10 Aug. 1817
Jonathan Brown	14 Aug. 1817
Joseph Proctor	14 Aug. 1817
Capt. Davidson	14 Aug. 1817
"Wife of Trask"	14 Aug. 1817
Mrs. Moore	14 Aug. 1817

Source: Charles Lenox Sargent, "The Sea Serpent, Evidence About It, Testimony Collected by C.L. Sargent," Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, MA.

⁴⁶⁷ John Low's "testimony" appears to be incorrectly dated. *Salem Gazette* editor, Thomas P. Cushing, reported that Low wrote a letter to his son in Salem, MA, dated August 14, 1817, stating that "there was seen on Monday and on Tuesday morning [Aug. 11, 12, 1817] playing about our harbor, between Eastern Point and Ten pound Island, a SNAKE . . ." "Monstrous Sea Serpent, the Largest Ever Seen in America, Has Just Made his Appearance in Gloucester . . ." (Boston: Bowen, 1817), Broadside, S4143, *Early American Imprints II*, Shaw-Shoemaker, Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 2004.

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